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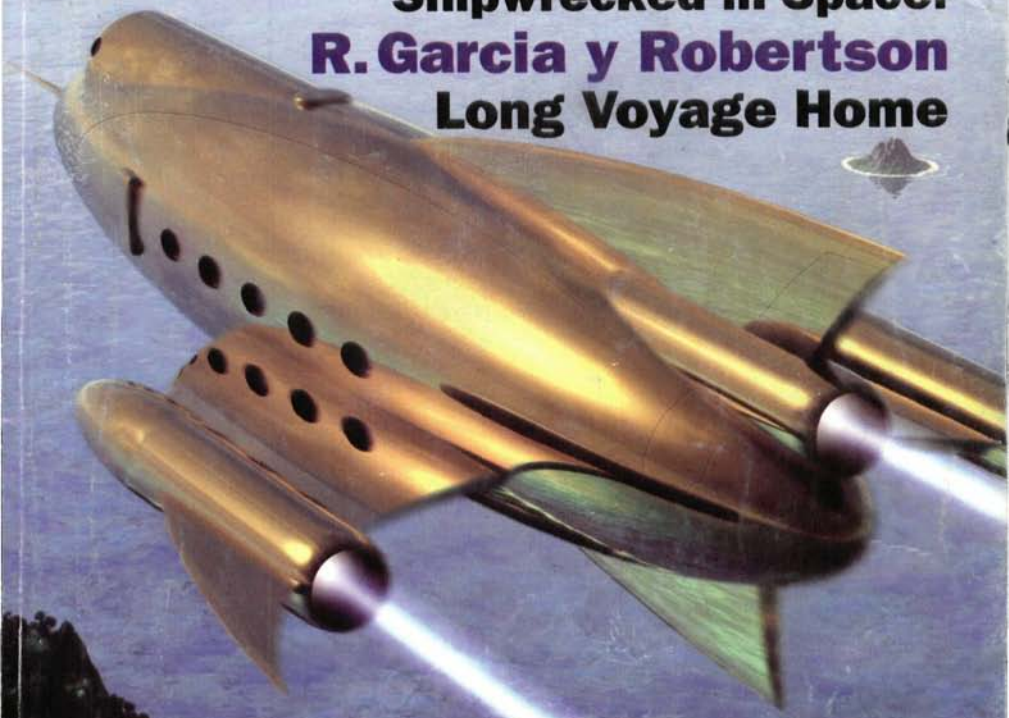

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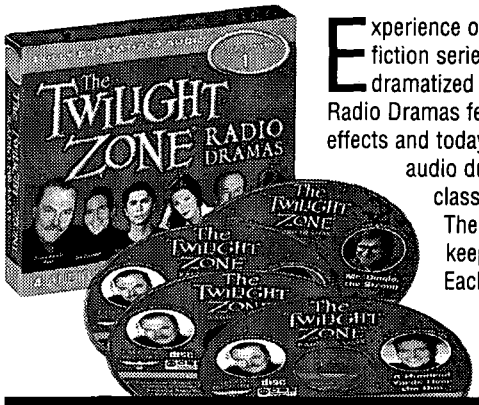

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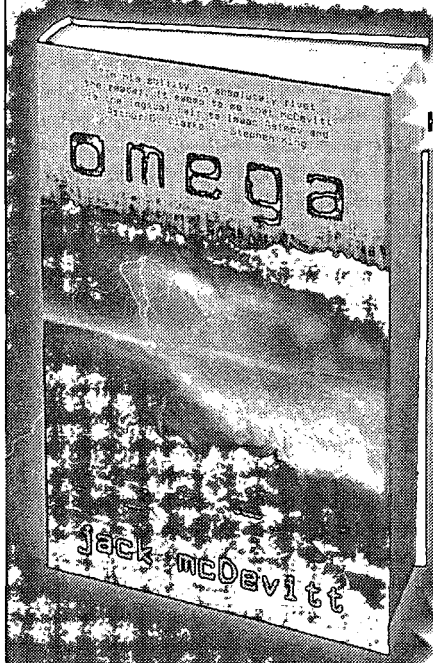

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FEBRUARY 2004

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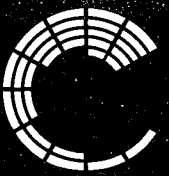

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

FRAGMENTS OUT OF TIME

Sophocles of Athens, who was born in 496 B.C. and lived ninety years, was one of the greatest of all playwrights, celebrated for the profundity of his thought, the grace of his expression, and the elegant structure of his plays. Seven of his works have come down to us, three of which—*Oedipus the King, Electra,* and *Antigone*—are still frequently performed all over the world, while the other four, though less commonly seen, are well known to all connoisseurs of classical literature.

His work is of special importance to me because, strange as it sounds, much of what I know about the art of constructing a story I learned by studying the plays of Sophocles and his fellow Greek playwrights Aeschylus and Euripides, and a book about their work by the British critic H.D.F. Kitto. In an autobiographical essay I wrote a quarter of a century ago I explained how Kitto, back when I was an undergraduate at Columbia University, had helped me toward my goal of becoming a successful science fiction writer:

"I bought a copy of Kitto's *Greek Tragedy* in 1954, as collateral reading for a course in Greek plays that I was taking during my junior year at Columbia. . . . Kitto began with the premise that each Greek tragedy was built around a significant dramatic situation designed to create the kind of tension that would provide the desired release for the audience when the tension was resolved. In his *Poetics,* Aristotle asserted that that was what Greek tragedy was all about: catharsis, the purging of pity and fear. Aristotle had used as his prime technical example *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles. But Kitto observed that many other surviving Greek plays failed to follow the technical rules that Aristotle, working from *Oedipus,* had laid down as the fundamental requirements for a Greek tragedy. Did that mean that other Greek playwrights (and sometimes even Sophocles himself) had done a lot of incompetent work?

"No," Kitto said. "We know that the plays that have come down to us were warmly hailed in their time and evidently had fulfilled the requirements of their audience. Their authors must be regarded as masters of their art, in full technical command. If sometimes their plays seem poorly constructed to us, static and undramatic, it must be because we are failing to find the true dramatic center of them. Instead of dismissing those plays as badly made," Kitto argued, "we need to reexamine our own assumptions about their structure."

From Kitto I learned how to find the true dramatic center of a Greek tragedy. He taught me what a dramatic situation really is: a zone of inevitable opposition of powerful forces that emit ever-widening reverberations until they are neutralized somehow in a way that creates understanding, insight, and harmony. Knowing that, I could work backward from my perception of my story's central issue

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e, and all the rest.

One thing that fascinated me, as pursued my studies in Greek dra-ıa—studies that have continued to ıis day—is that the little group of lays we have (seven of Sophocles, ɔven of Aeschylus, nineteen of Eu-pides) is only a fraction of the to-ıl output of these great artists. It as the custom of most Greek aywrights to offer a quartet of ays to the Athenian public every ɔar—usually a trilogy of serious ays on some theme out of Homer the Greek myths, accompanied a short and mocking comic play ıtirizing the first three. Thus a ng-lived playwright like Sopho-ɛs might have written a hundred ays or more during his career.

That any of them have survived ter twenty-five hundred years of rmoil and destruction is, I sup-ıse, miraculous. Copies of the ays were stored in the libraries of ch Greek cities as Ephesus, Anti-h, and Pergamum, but after the eat library of Alexandria in Egypt ıs founded, about 300 B.C., Alexan-ia gradually acquired the other eat libraries of the Hellenic world, us putting all the eggs in the same sket—and so, when the Alexan-ia library was destroyed after the amic conquest of that city, much classical literature was lost as a sult of the centralization of the lections in that single place. And know—from a surviving catalog the plays of Aeschylus and from ferences in Greek textbooks that ve come down to us—that the

ed by such passages as this, from my time-travel novel *Up the Line*:

"'Dr. Speer,' Metaxas said, 'is here [ancient Constantinople] on a collecting trip. He's a student of classical Greek drama, in search of lost plays.'

"Dr. Speer clicked his heels. He was the sort of Teutonic pedant who, you automatically know, would use his full academic title on all occasions. . . . Speer said, 'It has been most successful for me so far. Of course, my search is just beginning, yet already from Byzantine libraries I have obtained the *Nausicaa* and *Triptolemus* of Sophocles, and of Euripides the *Andromeda,* the *Peliades,* the *Phaethon,* and the *Oedipus,* and also of Aeschylus a nearly complete manuscript of *The Women of Aetna.* So you see that I have done well.' He clicked his heels again."

I wrote that in 1968. At that time I believed that only the names of these plays survived, and not a scrap of their texts. But a few months ago there came into my hands a surprising little volume called *Sophocles: Fragments.* It was edited and translated by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Emeritus Professor of Greek at Oxford, and was published in 1996 by the inestimable Loeb Classical Library of Harvard.

And here they are: the *Nausicaa* and the *Triptolemus* that I cited in my time-travel novel, and the *Phaedra* as well, the *Troilus,* the *Priam,* the *Heracles,* and over a hundred more. Of course, Professor Lloyd-Jones is unable to provide very much of these plays. In some

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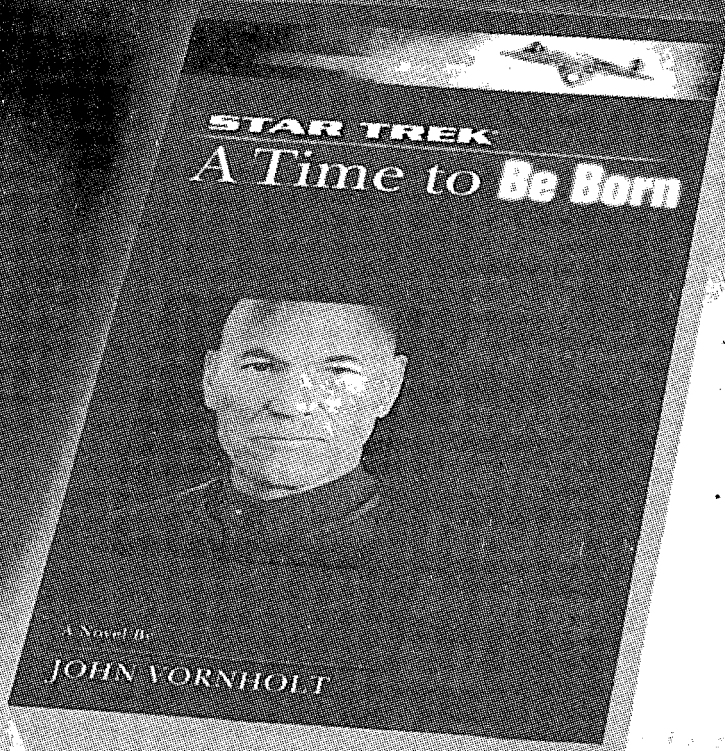

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cases, only a single sentence survives, quoted by some later Greek scholar whose own book has happened to come down to us. These are not particularly useful to those who seek some sense of Sophocles' dramatic art. From *The Infant Heracles* we have only two sentences: "For it is better to oblige gods than to oblige mortals" and "For the doer is bound to suffer somewhat." Most surviving fragments of the other lost plays are equally cryptic, though some of them, even with all context lost, do show the spark of Sophocles' dramatic power.

Some plays have fared better. These have reached us not as brief quotations from other authors, but as actual segments of the text found by archaeologists in papyrus scrolls in Egyptian ruins. One, *The Searchers,* runs to more than a dozen pages, giving us a boisterous scene of drunken satyrs searching for Apollo's lost cattle—the only good example we have of Sophocles' comic side. A few others exist in fragments five or six pages long. One of these, the *Eurypylus,* dramatizes in quite moving fashion a scene out of the latter days of the Trojan War, but sputters out in semi-coherence with:

". . . died . . . fortunate . . . he made a glorious end . . . ordinance . . . there be established now . . . statues that may sit together . . . the company of Telephus . . . close at hand . . . feasts . . . for him, and not without . . . giving birth to . . . bereft of . . . newly cut coil of hair."

There's a certain mysterious poetry in that, yes, but not the sort of poetry one associates with the great Greek tragedians. We are left only with the shadow of a piece of a play.

For most of the others, we have even less. I would surely like to read Sophocles' *Phaedra* and compare his handling of that powerful story with Euripides' extant play on the theme. (Phaedra, the daughter of Minos of Crete and the wife of Theseus, is rebuffed in love by Hippolytus, Theseus' son by an earlier marriage, and vengefully lodges a false accusation of rape against Hippolytus. Theseus, enraged, has his son slain by Poseidon, but eventually discovers his terrible mistake.) Alas, all we have of Sophocles' version is a series of scattered sentences such as "For it is not right that a noble man should take pleasure when the pleasure is not right" and "If you go through them all, you will not find a single mortal who is fortunate in all things."

And then, the *Thyestes,* about the dreadful crime that brought a curse lasting many generations upon the house of Atreus—*Niobe,* about the proud queen who boasted about her children to the mother of Apollo and Artemis, and was cruelly punished for it—*The Madness of Odysseus,* in which the great Greek warrior tries to evade serving in the Trojan War by pretending he's lost his mind—

But we aren't going to get to read them, aside from the stray bits and snatches that exist today. The rest will have to wait for the development of workable time travel.

The real and somber lesson I draw from this book of fragmentary plays of Sophocles is that one day all our words will be lost. The digits will decay, the dictionaries crumble. Eat, drink, be merry. Read what we have while we have it. And find some way of storing the texts, superior to the electronic means that we so foolishly are letting ourselves depend on nowadays, that will preserve them for future generations at least as well as those papyri in the Egyptian desert kept some of the Greek classics alive for our delight. ❍

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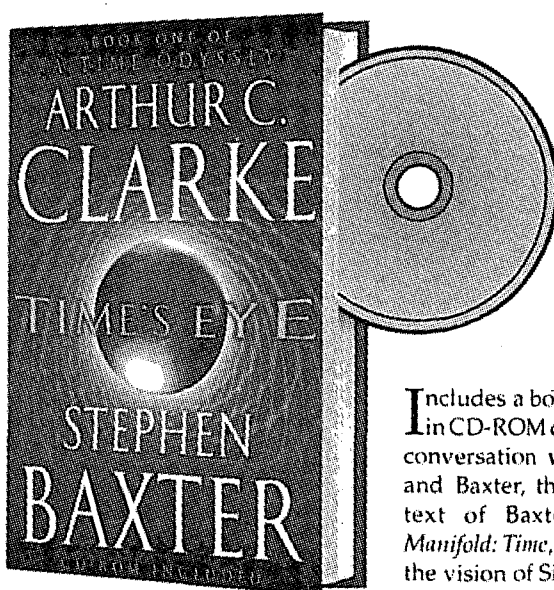

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James Patrick Kelly

GENRE

canned worms

In the last installment we puzzled over slipstream, that kind of writing that crosses genre boundaries. But what is genre? Mssrs. **Merriam and Webster** <*http://www.m-w.com/home.htm*> have this to say: "a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content." This is, alas, not a very useful definition, especially when applied to SF. For it is possible to imagine stories that have no science fictional content, but are written in a science fictional style or that mimic the forms of science fiction. Slipstream, for example. But SF is all about content, no?

There is a wonderful site created by Turkish fan Neyir Cenk Gökçe, **Definitions of Science Fiction** <*http://www.panix.com/~gokce/sf_defn.html*>, which offers fifty-two (count 'em!) different and sometimes conflicting attempts to characterize our genre. Here are three pretty good ones:

"SF is a controlled way to think and dream about the future. An integration of the mood and attitude of science (the objective universe) with the fears and hopes that spring from the unconscious. Anything that turns you and your social context, the social you, inside out. Nightmares and visions, always outlined by the barely possible." **Gregory Benford** <*http://www.sfsite.com/03b/ben29.htm*>.

"Science Fiction is the branch of literature that deals with the effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places." **James Gunn** <*http://falcon.cc.ukans.edu/~sfcenter/bio.htm*>.

"A science fiction story is a story built around human beings, with a human problem and a human solution, which would not have happened at all without its scientific content." **Theodore Sturgeon** <*http://www.physics.emory.edu/~weeks/misc/sturgeon.html*>.

contracts

Science. Change. The Future. We can all point to reams of SF that address these issues. But then there are many stories that "feel" like SF but probably aren't, under most of the fifty-two definitions. **Alternate History** <*http://www.uchronia.net*> is yet another example of fiction that seems related to our genre but doesn't feature SF content.

In thinking about what science fiction might be, it helps to distinguish between the genre as an art form and the genre as a commercial product. The writer's intentions and those of the publisher are by no means the same. When I sit down to start a new project, I'm not immedi-

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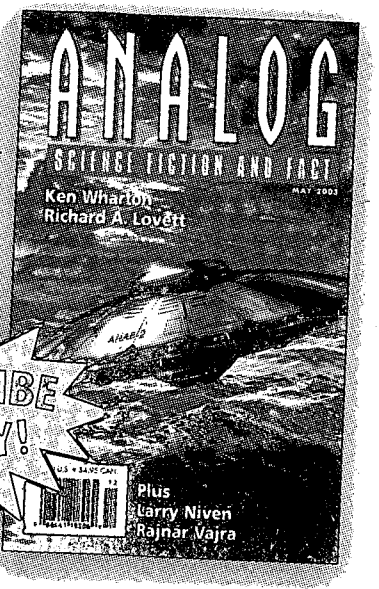

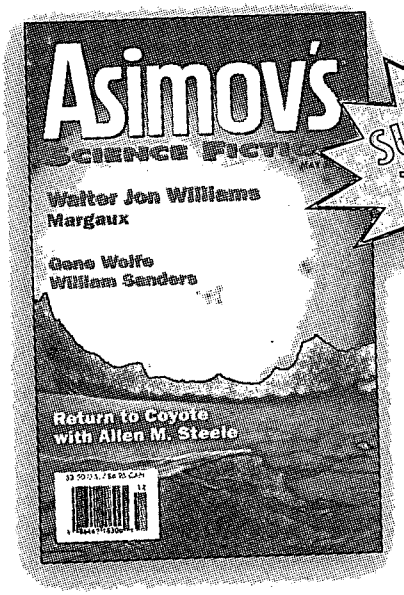

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ately concerned with whether I am going to be writing SF, fantasy, slipstream, mainstream, or whatever. I'm just trying to write a Jim Kelly story. As I shape the piece, however, it often becomes clear what genre I've wandered into. But even if it's not clear, I might nevertheless send the manuscript to Gardner and Sheila to see if they'll publish it in their SF magazine. If they do, does that then decide my story's genre?

Sure.

Well, maybe.

Actually not. Longtime subscribers may recall that this magazine once had a letters column, presided over by the indefatigable Isaac Asimov himself. From time to time irate readers would write to ask what certain stories (some perpetrated by me) were doing in their favorite SF magazine, when said stories had little or no discernible fantastic element. Isaac always rose to the writers' defense and proclaimed his confidence in the judgment of the editors. But I understand why those letters got written. It was because the stories didn't fulfill the genre contract.

That contract is a set of promises that a genre implicitly makes to its readers. For example, you bought this magazine with certain expectations. You would be understandably chagrined if *all* the stories in this issue were about people solving crimes. You want detection, plunk down your $3.99 for **Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine** <*http://www.themysteryplace.com/ahmm/index.shtml*>. Gardner and Sheila might slip an occasional story in that doesn't strictly adhere to the genre contract, but this is *Asimov's Science Fiction,* by god, and it's SF you're going to get! However, the marketing of *Asimov's* as an SF magazine does not always address the genre intentions of the writers herein.

Another component of our peculiar genre is what **Samuel R. Delany** <*http://www.pcc.com/~jay/delany*> has called the *protocols* by which readers interpret context. You read the stories in *Asimov's* differently than you do those in *Hitchcock's*. Impossible things can be commonplaces, moral certitudes can be discredited—the very sentences themselves can take on strange, new meanings. On the most basic level, consider some of the jargon we toss off so blithely. Hive-mind. FTL. Wetware. AI. Nano. Hyperspace. VR. Cyborg.

The whole clanking machinery of our genre is at once a bug and a feature, a blessing and a curse. Thank God I don't have to stop the plot to explain to you how my AI protagonist was programmed. You've read so much of this stuff that all I have to do is wave the authorial wand and you'll accept that an intelligent house might obsess about her furniture. But will your Grandma Lucy get it? Will little Billy be able to wrap his mind around nanotech when he's still fuzzy about the difference between an electron and a proton? What makes SF so special to some also makes it too specialized for others.

slippage

In her essay "**An Introduction to Interstitial Arts**" <*http://www.endicott-studio.com/IA/IA-intro.html*> **Delia Sherman** <*http://www.sff.net/people/kushnersherman/sherman*> imagines a continent called Literature filled with countries called Mystery and

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Romance and Thrillers and Regional fiction. She writes, "Historical fiction, Literary Realism, African-American fiction, and Regional fiction have formed an alliance, Mainstream Literature, which allows them to pass freely over one another's borders." Other countries, including Fantasy and SF, are isolated. She argues that certain writers whose work we might be tempted to call slipstream are, in fact, interstitial, that is, they prowl the borders between these literary countries. This is a useful conceit because it keeps the slipstream from becoming a genre unto itself. Interstitial writers sign no genre contract—or rather, the contract is that rules will be broken and genre expectations thwarted.

You can find Sherman's essay on the website for **Interstitial Arts** <*http://www.endicott-studio.com/ia.html*>, the site of a group calling themselves Artists Without Borders. Many of these folks have strong ties to SF and might well be considered slipstream writers. However, they claim that not only do they cross borders between science fiction and other genres, as slipstream traditionally does, but they cross genres that have nothing to do with SF. **Terri Windling** <*http://www.endicott-studio.com/bioterri.html*> lays out **the Interstitial Arts agenda** <*http://www.endicott-studio.com/IA/IA-welcome.html*>: "We're not seeking to create a new category of fiction, but to establish a better way of reading border-crossing texts. In fact, we're not seeking to create a new movement at all, but to recognize a movement that already exists."

That is a telling point. Slipstream may be hot but is it new? Haven't SF artists been crossing boundaries for some time? The theory of interstitial arts and its subset, slipstream, is that these forms inhabit the territory between our genre and various other genres. But the best minds of our genre can't agree on what SF is, and without a coherent definition, how does a writer know when she's crossed a boundary?

Consider **Carol Emshwiller** <*http://www.sfwa.org/members/emshwiller*> who has just, as I write this, won her first **Nebula** <*http://www.sfwa.org/news/03nebwin.htm*>, for her story "Creature." Her work is brilliant and idiosyncratic and much of it is undeniably slipstream. Carol started selling stories in the fifties. Here's Carol on her writing process: "Whenever I sit down to write too consciously (and I do sometimes) it ends up with no resonance. It looks and feels planned. When I do that it has no . . . what? Underwear? Underside? This is why Kafka is my favorite writer. Kafka's stories aren't about what they're about. I like them for what they don't say. Sometimes Stephen King stories sound like Kafka stories but they're only about the stories you see. They're only about their surface . . . about what happens. Kafka's stories are not about their stories."

How about **Jonathan Carroll** <*http://www.jonathancarroll.com*>, whose first novel, *The Land of laughs,* was published twenty-four years ago? He writes: "Over the years my work has been described as Fantasy, horror, SciFi, mainstream, slipstream, Rap, House, and Cha Cha Cha. In the end who cares what it is so long as it is worth reading? Categories often, sadly, keep people from experiencing things that would enrich their lives."

Then there's **Karen Joy Fowler**

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<*http://www.sfwa.org/members/Fowler*>, who has been delighting readers since the mid-eighties. Although her recent story "**What I Didn't See**" <*http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals_archive/fowler*> touched off a firestorm among some of the self-appointed guardians of genre purity, it is of a piece with most of her earlier work. Karen's stories are complex and deep; even her subtext has subtext. As she writes, "I cannot reduce my themes to a single sentence. They are not messages but constellations of issues and questions. It takes the whole story. If I could say what I wanted to say in a sentence, I would do so and save us all a lot of time."

It's true, though, that we've seen a flurry of new genre crossings in the last few years. Besides online 'zines like **Fantastic Metropolis** <*http://www.fantasticmetropolis.com*>, **Strange Horizons** <*http://www.strangehorizons.com*>, and the promising **S1ngularity** <*http://www.sfsite.com/singularity*>, three print sources stand out: the **Leviathan anthologies** <*http://www.ministryofwhimsy.com*>, edited by **Jeff VanderMeer** <*http://www.vandermeer.redsine.com*> and Forrest Aguirre, the **Polyphony anthologies** <*http://www.wheatlandpress.com/polyphony/index.html*>, edited by Deborah Layne and **Jay Lake** <*http://www.jlake.com*>, and **Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet** <*http://www.lcrw.net/lcrw/index.htm*>, edited by **Gavin J. Grant** <*http://www.endicott-studio.com/biograntlink.html#gavin*>.

A frequent contributor to *Lady Churchill's* is **Kelly Link** <*http://www.kellylink.net*>, who last year won the Nebula for her novelette "Louise's Ghost." Kelly talks about her struggles with genre: "I'll start out thinking, 'I'll write a ghost story' or 'I'll write a detective story.' Then I'll begin and think, 'I can't do this. I can't put this together.' So I'll write around the ghost story, vaguely sort of a ghost story, but not really. I'll know when it's not the story that I meant to write, but if people ask me questions, like, 'What exactly happened here?' my brain will shut down and I'll say, 'I don't know!' "

exit

In his provocative 1998 essay, **"The Squandered Promise of Science Fiction"** <*http://www.sinc.sunysb.edu/Stu/dmyers/lethems_vision.html*>, sometime slipstreamer **Jonathan Lethem** <*http://www.sinc.sunysb.edu/Stu/dmyers*> proposed an alternate history of our genre. "In 1973 **Thomas Pynchon's** <*http://www.hyperarts.com/pynchon/index.html*> *Gravity's Rainbow* was awarded the Nebula, the highest honor available in the field once known as 'science fiction'—a term now mostly forgotten." In our reality, **Arthur C. Clarke** <*http://www.lsi.usp.br/~rbianchi/clarke*> won for *Rendezvous with Rama*. Jonathan's essay was a thought experiment about what would have happened if SF merged with the mainstream. He argued that it might be better for all concerned if there were no genres, if Delia Sherman's continent of Literature had no boundaries. In such a literary utopia there would be no SF or slipstream or mainstream. We'd all be just one big happy family.

Yeah, right. That'll happen just about the time that a robot becomes Pope. ○

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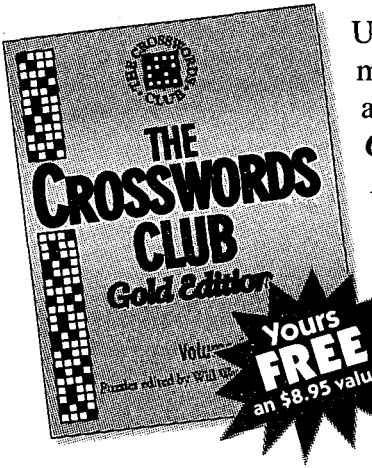

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TRAVELS WITH MY CATS

Mike Resnick

Mike Resnick has won four Hugos and been nominated for the award twenty-four times—most often for stories from this magazine. Sometime in the next year his hundredth book as a writer or editor will be published. He tells us that he considers "Travels with My Cats" to be one of his three best stories.

I found it in the back of a neighbor's garage. They were retiring and moving to Florida, and they'd put most of their stuff up for sale rather than pay to ship it south.

I was eleven years old, and I was looking for a Tarzan book, or maybe one of Clarence Mulford's Hopalong Cassidy epics, or perhaps (if my mother was looking the other way) a forbidden Mickey Spillane novel. I found them, too—and then the real world intruded. They were 50 cents each (and a whole dollar for *Kiss Me Deadly*), and all I had was a nickel.

So I rummaged some more, and finally found the only book that was in my price range. It was called *Travels with My Cats,* and the author was Miss Priscilla Wallace. Not Priscilla, but Miss Priscilla. For years I thought Miss was her first name.

I thumbed through it, hoping it at least had some photos of half-naked native girls hidden in its pages. There weren't any pictures at all, just words. I wasn't surprised; somehow I had known that an author called Miss wasn't going to plaster naked women all over her book.

I decided that the book itself felt too fancy and feminine for a boy who was trying out for the Little League later in the day—the letters on the cover were somehow raised above the rest of the surface, the endpapers were an elegant satin, the boards were covered with a russet, velvet-like cloth, and it even had a bookmark, which was a satin ribbon attached to the binding. I was about to put it back when it fell open to a page that said that this was Number 121 of a Limited Printing of 200.

That put a whole new light on things. My very own limited edition for a nickel—how could I say No? I brought it to the front of the garage, duti-

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fully paid my nickel, and waited for my mother to finish looking (she always looked, never shopped—shopping implied parting with money, and she and my father were Depression kids who never bought what they could rent cheaper, or, better yet, borrow for free).

That night I was faced with a major decision. I didn't want to read a book called *Travels with My Cats* by a woman called Miss, but I'd spent my last nickel on it—well, the last until my allowance came due again next week—and I'd read all my other books so often you could almost see the eyetracks all over them.

So I picked it up without much enthusiasm, and read the first page, and then the next—and suddenly I was transported to Kenya Colony and Siam and the Amazon. Miss Priscilla Wallace had a way of describing things that made me wish I was there, and when I finished a section I felt like I'd *been* there.

There were cities I'd never heard of before, cities with exotic names like Maracaibo and Samarkand and Addis Ababa, some with names like Constantinople that I couldn't even find on the map.

Her father had been an explorer, back in the days when there still *were* explorers. She had taken her first few trips abroad with him, and he had undoubtedly give her a taste for distant lands. (My own father was a typesetter. How I envied her!)

I had half hoped the African section would be filled with rampaging elephants and man-eating lions, and maybe it was—but that wasn't the way she saw it. Africa may have been red of tooth and claw, but to her it reflected the gold of the morning sun, and the dark, shadowy places were filled with wonder, not terror.

She could find beauty anywhere. She would describe two hundred flower sellers lined up along the Seine on a Sunday morning in Paris, or a single frail blossom in the middle of the Gobi Desert, and somehow you knew that each was as wondrous as she said.

And suddenly I jumped as the alarm clock started buzzing. It was the first time I'd ever stayed up for the entire night. I put the book away, got dressed for school, and hurried home after school so that I could finish it.

I must have read it six or seven more times that year. I got to the point where I could almost recite parts of it word-for-word. I was in love with those exotic faraway places, and maybe a little bit in love with the author, too. I even wrote her a fan letter addressed to "Miss Priscilla Wallace, Somewhere," but of course it came back.

Then, in the fall, I discovered Robert A. Heinlein and Louis L'Amour, and a friend saw *Travels with My Cats* and teased me about its fancy cover and the fact that it was written by a woman, so I put it on a shelf and over the years I forgot about it.

I never saw all those wonderful, mysterious places she wrote about. I never did a lot of things. I never made a name for myself. I never got rich and famous. I never married.

By the time I was forty, I was finally ready to admit that nothing unusual or exciting was ever likely to happen to me. I'd written half of a novel that I was never going to finish or sell, and I'd spent twenty years looking fruitlessly for someone I could love. (That was Step One; Step

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Two—finding someone who could love me—would probably have been even more difficult, but I never got around to it.)

I was tired of the city, and of rubbing shoulders with people who had latched onto the happiness and success that had somehow eluded me. I was Midwestern born and bred, and eventually I moved to Wisconsin's North Woods, where the most exotic cities were small towns like Manitowoc and Minnaqua and Wausau—a far cry from Macau and Marrakech and the other glittering capitals of Priscilla Wallace's book.

I worked as a copy editor for one of the local weekly newspapers—the kind where getting the restaurant and real estate ads right was more important than spelling the names in the news stories correctly. It wasn't the most challenging job in the world, but it was pleasant enough, and I wasn't looking for any challenges. Youthful dreams of triumph had gone the way of youthful dreams of love and passion; at this late date, I'd settled for tranquility.

I rented a small house out on a little nameless lake, some fifteen miles out of town. It wasn't without its share of charm: it had an old-fashioned veranda, with a porch swing that was almost as old as the house. A pier for the boat I didn't own jutted out into the lake, and there was even a water trough for the original owner's horses. There was no air-conditioning, but I didn't really need it—and in the winter I'd sit by the fire, reading the latest paperback thriller.

It was on a late summer's night, with just a bit of a Wisconsin chill in the air, as I sat next to the empty fireplace, reading about a rip-roaring gun-blazing car chase through Berlin or Prague or some other city I'll never see, that I found myself wondering if this was my future: a lonely old man, spending his evenings reading pop fiction by a fireplace, maybe with a blanket over his legs, his only companion a tabby cat. . . .

And for some reason—probably the notion of the tabby—I remembered *Travels with My Cats.* I'd never owned a cat, but *she* had; there had been two of them, and they'd gone everywhere with her.

I hadn't thought of the book for years. I didn't even know if I still had it. But for some reason, I felt an urge to pick it up and look through it.

I went to the spare room, where I kept all the stuff I hadn't unpacked yet. There were maybe two dozen boxes of books. I opened the first of them, then the next. I rummaged through Bradburys and Asimovs and Chandlers and Hammetts, dug deep beneath Ludlums and Amblers and a pair of ancient Zane Grays—and suddenly there it was, as elegant as ever. My one and only Limited Numbered Edition.

So, for the first time in perhaps thirty years, I opened the book and began reading it. And found myself just as captivated as I had been the first time. It was every bit as wonderful as I remembered. And, as I had done three decades ago, I lost all track of the time and finished it just as the sun was rising.

I didn't get much work done that morning. All I could do was think about those exquisite descriptions and insights into worlds that no longer existed—and then I began wondering if Priscilla Wallace herself still existed. She'd probably be a very old lady, but maybe I could update that old fan letter and finally send it.

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I stopped by the local library at lunchtime, determined to pick up everything else she had written. There was nothing on the shelves or in their card file. (They were a friendly old-fashioned rural library; computerizing their stock was still decades away.)

I went back to the office and had my computer run a search on her. There were thirty-seven distinct and different Priscilla Wallaces. One was an actress in low-budget movies. One taught at Georgetown University. One was a diplomat stationed in Bratislava. One was a wildly successful breeder of show poodles. One was the youthful mother of a set of sextuplets in South Carolina. One was an inker for a Sunday comic strip.

And then, just when I was sure the computer wouldn't be able to find her, the following came up on my screen:

"Wallace, Priscilla, b. 1892, d. 1926. Author of one book: *Travels with My Cats*."

1926. So much for fan letters, then or now; she'd died decades before I'd been born. Even so, I felt a sudden sense of loss, and of resentment—resentment that someone like that had died so young, and that all her unlived years had been taken by people who would never see the beauty that she found everywhere she went.

People like me.

There was also a photo. It looked like a reproduction of an old sepia-toned tintype, and it showed a slender, auburn-haired young woman with large dark eyes that seemed somehow sad to me. Or maybe the sadness was my own, because I knew she would die at thirty-four and all that passion for life would die with her. I printed up a hard copy, put it in my desk drawer, and took it home with me at the end of the day. I don't know why. There were only two sentences on it. Somehow a life—any life—deserved more than that. Especially one that could reach out from the grave and touch me and make me feel, at least while I was reading her book, that maybe the world wasn't quite as dull and ordinary as it seemed to me.

That night, after I heated up a frozen dinner, I sat down by the fireplace and picked up *Travels with My Cats* again, just thumbing through it to read my favorite passages here and there. There was the one about the stately procession of elephants against the backdrop of snow-capped Kilimanjaro, and another about the overpowering perfume of the flowers as she walked through the gardens of Versailles on a May morning. And then, toward the end, there was what had become my favorite of all:

"There is so much yet to see, so much still to do, that on days like this I wish I could live forever. I take comfort in the heartfelt belief that long after I am gone, I will be alive again for as long as someone picks up a copy of this book and reads it."

It *was* a comforting belief, certainly more immortality than I ever aspired to. I'd made no mark, left no sign by which anyone would know I'd ever been here. Twenty years after my death, maybe thirty at most, no one would ever know that I'd even existed, that a man named Ethan Owens—my name; you've never encountered it before, and you doubtless never will again—lived and worked and died here, that he tried to get through each day without doing anyone any harm, and that was the sum total of his accomplishments.

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Not like her. Or maybe very much like her. She was no politician, no warrior queen. There were no monuments to her. She wrote a forgotten little travel book and died before she could write another. She'd been gone for more than three-quarters of a century. Who remembered Priscilla Wallace?

I poured myself a beer and began reading again. Somehow, the more she described each exotic city and primal jungle, the less exotic and primal they felt, the more they seemed like an extension of home. As often as I read it, I couldn't figure out how she managed to do that.

I was distracted by a clattering on the veranda. *Damned raccoons are getting bolder every night,* I thought—but then I heard a very distinct *meow*. My nearest neighbor was a mile away, and that seemed a long way for a cat to wander, but I figured the least I could do was go out and look, and if it had a collar and a tag I'd call its owner. And if not, I'd shoo it away before it got into the wrong end of a disagreement with the local raccoons.

I opened the door and stepped out onto the veranda. Sure enough, there was a cat there, a small white one with a couple of tan markings on its head and body. I reached down to pick it up, and it backed away a couple of steps.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said gently.

"He knows that," said a feminine voice. "He's just shy."

I turned—and there she was, sitting on my porch swing. She made a gesture, and the cat walked across the veranda and jumped up onto her lap.

I'd seen that face earlier in the day, staring at me in sepia tones. I'd studied it for hours, until I knew its every contour.

It was *her.*

"It's a beautiful night, isn't it?" she said as I kept gaping at her. "And quiet. Even the birds are asleep." She paused. "Only the cicadas are awake, serenading us with their symphonies."

I didn't know what to say, so I just watched her and waited for her to vanish.

"You look pale," she noted after a moment.

"You look real," I finally managed to croak.

"Of course I do," she replied with a smile. "I *am* real."

"You're Miss Priscilla Wallace, and I've spent so much time thinking about you that I've begun hallucinating."

"Do I look like an hallucination?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I don't think I've ever had one before, so I don't know what they look like—except that obviously they look like you." I paused. "They could look a lot worse. You have a beautiful face."

She laughed at that. The cat jumped, startled, and she began stroking it gently. "I do believe you're trying to make me blush," she said.

"*Can* you blush?" I asked, and then of course wished I hadn't.

"Of course I can," she replied, "though I had my doubts after I got back from Tahiti. The things they *do* there!" Then, "You were reading *Travels with My Cats,* weren't you?"

"Yes, I was. It's been one of my most cherished possessions since I was a child."

"Was it a gift?" she asked.

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"No, I bought it myself."

"That's very gratifying."

"It's very gratifying to finally meet the author who's given me so much pleasure," I said, feeling like an awkward kid all over again.

She looked puzzled, as if she was about to ask a question. Then she changed her mind and smiled again. It was a lovely smile, as I had known it would be.

"This is very pretty property," she said. "Is it yours all the way up to the lake?"

"Yes."

"Does anyone else live here?"

"Just me."

"You like your privacy," she said. It was a statement, not a question.

"Not especially," I answered. "That's just the way things worked out. People don't seem to like me very much."

Now why the hell did I tell you that? I thought. *I've never even admitted it to myself.*

"You seem like a very nice person," she said. "I find it difficult to believe that people don't like you."

"Maybe I overstated the case," I admitted. "Mostly they don't notice me." I shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't mean to unburden myself on you."

"You're all alone. You have to unburden yourself to *someone,*" she replied. "I think you just need a little more self-confidence."

"Perhaps."

She stared at me for a long moment. "You keep looking like you're expecting something terrible to happen."

"I'm expecting you to disappear."

"Would that be so terrible?"

"Yes," I said promptly. "It would be."

"Then why don't you simply accept that I'm here? If you're wrong, you'll know it soon enough."

I noded. "Yeah, you're Priscilla Wallace, all right. That's exactly the kind of answer she'd give."

"You know who *I* am. Perhaps you'll tell me who *you* are?"

"My name is Ethan Owens."

"Ethan," she repeated. "That's a nice name."

"You think so?"

"I wouldn't say so if I didn't." She paused. "Shall I call you Ethan, or Mr. Owens?"

"Ethan, by all means. I feel like I've known you all my life." I felt another embarrassing admission coming on. "I even wrote you a fan letter when I was a kid, but it came back."

"I would have liked that," she said. "I never once got a fan letter. Not from anyone."

"I'm sure hundreds of people wanted to write. Maybe they couldn't find your address either."

"Maybe," she said dubiously.

"In fact, just today I was thinking about sending it again."

"Whatever you wanted to say, you can tell me in person." The cat

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jumped back down onto the veranda. "You look very uncomfortable, perched on the railing like that, Ethan. Why don't you come and sit beside me?"

"I'd like that very much," I said, standing up. Then I thought it over. "No, I'd better not."

"I'm thirty-two years old," she said in amused tones. "I don't need a chaperone."

"Not with me, you don't," I assured her. "Besides, I don't think we have them anymore."

"Then what's the problem?"

"The truth?" I said. "If I sit next to you, at some point my hip will press against yours, or perhaps I'll inadvertently touch your hand. And . . ."

"And what?"

"And I don't want to find out that you're not really here."

"But I am."

"I hope so," I said. "But I can believe it a lot easier from where I am."

She shrugged. "As you wish."

"I've had my wish for the night," I said.

"Then why don't we just sit and enjoy the breeze and the scents of the Wisconsin night?"

"Whatever makes you happy," I said.

"Being here makes me happy. Knowing my book is still being read makes me happy." She was silent for a moment, staring off into the darkness. "What's the date, Ethan?"

"April 17."

"I mean the year."

"2004."

She looked surprised. "It's been *that* long?"

"Since. . . ?" I said hesitantly.

"Since I died," she said. "Oh, I know I must have died a long time ago. I have no tomorrows, and my yesterdays are all so very long ago. But the new millennium? It seems"—she searched for the right word—"excessive."

"You were born in 1892, more than a century ago," I said.

"How did you know that?"

"I had the computer run a search on you."

"I don't know what a computer is," she said. Then, suddenly: "Do you also know when and how I died?"

"I know when, not how."

"Please don't tell me," she said. "I'm thirty-two, and I've just written the last page of my book. I don't know what comes next, and it would be wrong for you to tell me."

"All right," I said. Then, borrowing her expression, "As you wish."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

Suddenly the little white cat tensed and looked off across the yard.

"He sees his brother," said Priscilla.

"It's probably just the raccoons," I said. "They can be a nuisance."

"No," she insisted. "I know his body language. That's his brother out there."

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And sure enough, I heard a distinct *meow* a moment later. The white cat leaped off the veranda and headed toward it.

"I'd better go get them before they become completely lost," said Priscilla, getting to her feet. "It happened once in Brazil, and I didn't find them for almost two days."

"I'll get a flashlight and come with you," I said.

"No, you might frighten them, and it wouldn't do to have them run away in strange surroundings." She stood up and stared at me. "You seem like a very nice man, Ethan Owens. I'm glad we finally met." She smiled sadly. "I just wish you weren't so lonely."

She climbed down to the yard and walked off into the darkness before I could lie and tell her I led a rich full life and wasn't lonely at all. Suddenly I had a premonition that she wasn't coming back. "Will we meet again?" I called after her as she vanished from sight.

"That depends on you, doesn't it?" came her answer out of the darkness.

I sat on the porch swing, waiting for her to reappear with the cats. Finally, despite the cold night air, I fell asleep. I woke up when the sun hit the swing in the morning.

I was alone.

It took me almost half the day to convince myself that what had happened the night before was just a dream. It wasn't like any other dream I'd ever had, because I remembered every detail of it, every word she'd said, every gesture she'd made. Of course she hadn't really visited me, but just the same I couldn't get Priscilla Wallace out of my mind, so I finally stopped working and used my computer to try to learn more about her.

There was nothing more to be found under her name except for that single brief entry. I tried a search on *Travels with My Cats* and came up empty. I checked to see if her father had ever written a book about his explorations; he hadn't. I even contacted a few of the hotels she had stayed at, alone or with her father, but none of them kept records that far back.

I tried one line of pursuit after another, but none of them proved fruitful. History had swallowed her up almost as completely as it would someday swallow me. Other than the book, the only proof I had that she had ever lived was that one computer entry, consisting of ten words and two dates. Wanted criminals couldn't hide from the law any better than she'd hidden from posterity.

Finally I looked out the window and realized that night had fallen and everyone else had gone home. (There's no night shift on a weekly paper.) I stopped by a local diner, grabbed a ham sandwich and a cup of coffee, and headed back to the lake.

I watched the ten o'clock news on TV, then sat down and picked up her book again, just to convince myself that she really *had* lived once upon a time. After a couple of minutes I got restless, put the book back on a table, and walked out for a breath of fresh air.

She was sitting on the porch swing, right where she had been the night before. There was a different cat next to her, a black one with white feet and white circles around its eyes.

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She noticed me looking at the cat. "This is Goggle," she said. "I think he's exceptionally well-named, don't you?"

"I suppose," I said distractedly.

"The white one is Giggle, because he loves getting into all sorts of mischief." I didn't say anything. Finally she smiled. "Which of them has your tongue?"

"You're back," I said at last.

"Of course I am."

"I was reading your book again," I said. "I don't think I've ever encountered anyone who loved life so much."

"There's so much to love!"

"For some of us."

"It's all around you, Ethan," she said.

"I prefer seeing it through your eyes. It was like you were born again into a new world each morning," I said. "I suppose that's why I kept your book, and why I find myself re-reading it—to share what you see and feel."

"You can feel things yourself."

I shook my head. "I prefer what *you* feel."

"Poor Ethan," she said sincerely. "You've never loved anything, have you?"

"I've tried."

"That isn't what I said." She stared at me curiously. "Have you ever married?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know." I decided I might as well give her an honest answer. "Probably because none of them ever measured up to you."

"I'm not that special," she said.

"To me you are. You always have been."

She frowned. "I wanted my book to enrich your life, Ethan, not ruin it."

"You didn't ruin it," I said. "You made it a little more bearable."

"I wonder . . ." she mused.

"About what?"

"My being here. It's puzzling."

"Puzzling is an understatement," I said. "Unbelievable is more the word for it."

She shook her head distractedly. "You don't understand. I remember last night."

"So do I—every second of it."

"That's not what I meant." She stroked the cat absently. "I was never brought back before last night. I wasn't sure then. I thought perhaps I forgot after each episode. But today I remember last night."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"You can't be the only person to read my book since I died. Or even if you were, I've never been called back before, not even by you." She stared at me for a long moment. "Maybe I was wrong."

"About what?"

"Maybe what brought me here wasn't the fact that *I* needed to be read. Maybe it's because *you* so desperately need someone."

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"I—" I began heatedly, and then stopped. For a moment it seemed like the whole world had stopped with me. Then the moon came out from behind a cloud, and an owl hooted off to the left.

"What is it?"

"I was about to tell you that I'm not that lonely," I said. "But it would have been a lie."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, Ethan."

"It's nothing to brag about, either." There was something about her that made me say things I'd never said to anyone else, including myself. "I had such high hopes when I was a boy. I was going to love my work, and I was going to be good at it. I was going to find a woman to love and spend the rest of my life with. I was going to see all the places you described. Over the years I saw each of those hopes die. Now I settle for paying my bills and getting regular check-ups at the doctor's." I sighed deeply. "I think my life can be described as a fully-realized diminished expectation."

"You have to take risks, Ethan," she said gently.

"I'm not like you," I said. "I wish I was, but I'm not. Besides, there aren't any wild places left."

She shook her head. "That's not what I meant. Love involves risk. You have to risk getting hurt."

"I've *been* hurt," I said. "It's nothing to write home about."

"Maybe that's why I'm here. You can't be hurt by a ghost."

The hell I can't, I thought. Aloud I said: "*Are* you a ghost?"

"I don't feel like one."

"You don't look like one."

"How *do* I look?" she asked.

"As lovely as I always knew you were."

"Fashions change."

"But beauty doesn't," I said.

"That's very kind of you to say, but I must look very old-fashioned. In fact, the world I knew must seem primitive to you." Her face brightened. "It's a new millennium. Tell me what's happened."

"We've walked on the moon—and we've landed ships on Mars and Venus."

She looked up into the night sky. "The moon!" she exclaimed. Then: "Why are you here when you could be there?"

"I'm not a risk-taker, remember?"

"What an exciting time to be alive!" she said enthusiastically. "I always wanted to see what lay beyond the next hill. But *you*—you get to see what's beyond the next star!"

"It's not that simple," I said.

"But it will be," she persisted.

"Someday," I agreed. "Not during my lifetime, but someday."

"Then you should die with the greatest reluctance," she said. "I'm sure I did." She looked up at the stars, as if envisioning herself flying to each of them. "Tell me more about the future."

"I don't know anything about the future," I said.

"*My* future. Your present."

I told her what I could. She seemed amazed that hundreds of millions of

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people now traveled by air, that I didn't know anyone who didn't own a car, and that train travel had almost disappeared in America. The thought of television fascinated her; I decided not to tell her what a vast wasteland it had been since its inception. Color movies, sound movies, computers—she wanted to know all about them. She was eager to learn if zoos had become more humane, if *people* had become more humane. She couldn't believe that heart transplants were actually routine.

I spoke for hours. Finally I just got so dry I told her I was going to have to take a break for a couple of minutes while I went into the kitchen and got us some drinks. She'd never heard of Fanta or Dr. Pepper, which is what I had, and she didn't like beer, so I made her an iced tea and popped open a Bud for me. When I brought them out to the porch she and Goggle were gone.

I didn't even bother looking for her. I knew she had returned to the *somewhere* from which she had come.

She was back again the next three nights, sometimes with one cat, sometimes with both. She told me about her travels, about her overwhelming urge to see what there was to see in the little window of time allotted us humans, and I told her about the various wonders she would never see.

It was strange, conversing with a phantom every night. She kept assuring me she was real, and I believed it when she said it, but I was still afraid to touch her and discover that she was just a dream after all. Somehow, as if they knew my fears, the cats kept their distance too; not once in all those evenings did either of them ever so much as brush against me.

"I wish I'd seen all the sights *they've* seen," I said on the third night, nodding toward the cats.

"Some people thought it was cruel to take them all over the world with me," replied Priscilla, absently running her hand over Goggle's back as he purred contentedly. "I think it would have been more cruel to leave them behind."

"None of the cats—these or the ones that came before—ever caused any problems?"

"Certainly they did," she said. "But when you love something, you put up with the problems."

"Yeah, I suppose you do."

"How do you know?" she asked. "I thought you said you'd never loved anything."

"Maybe I was wrong."

"Oh?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe I love someone who vanishes every night when I turn my back." She stared at me, and suddenly I felt very awkward. I shrugged uncomfortably. "Maybe."

"I'm touched, Ethan," she said. "But I'm not of this world, not the way you are."

"I haven't complained," I said. "I'll settle for the moments I can get." I tried to smile; it was a disaster. "Besides, I don't even know if you're real."

"I keep telling you I am."

"I know."

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"What would you do if you *knew* I was?" she asked.

"Really?"

"Really."

I stared at her. "Try not to get mad," I began.

"I won't get mad."

"I've wanted to hold you and kiss you since the first instant I saw you on my veranda," I said.

"Then why haven't you?"

"I have this . . . this *dread* that if I try to touch you and you're not here, if I prove conclusively to myself that you don't exist, then I'll never see you again."

"Remember what I told you about love and risk?"

"I remember."

"And?"

"Maybe I'll try tomorrow," I said. "I just don't want to lose you yet. I'm not feeling that brave tonight."

She smiled, a rather sad smile I thought. "Maybe you'll get tired of reading me."

"Never!"

"But it's the same book all the time. How often can you read it?"

I looked at her, young, vibrant, maybe two years from death, certainly less than three. I knew what lay ahead for her; all she could see was a lifetime of wonderful experiences stretching out into the distance.

"Then I'll read one of your other books."

"I wrote others?" she asked.

"Dozens of them," I lied.

She couldn't stop smiling. "Really?"

"Really."

"Thank you, Ethan," she said. "You've made me very happy."

"Then we're even."

There was a noisy squabble down by the lake. She quickly looked around for her cats, but they were on the porch, their attention also attracted by the noise.

"Raccoons," I said.

"Why are they fighting?"

"Probably a dead fish washed up on the shore," I answered. "They're not much for sharing."

She laughed. "They remind me of some people I know." She paused. "Some people I *knew,*" she amended.

"Do you miss them—your friends, I mean?"

"No. I had hundreds of acquaintances, but very few close friends. I was never in one place long enough to make them. It's only when I'm with you that I realize they're gone." She paused. "I don't quite understand it. I know that I'm here with you, in the new millennium—but I feel like I just celebrated my thirty-second birthday. Tomorrow I'll put flowers on my father's grave, and next week I set sail for Madrid."

"Madrid?" I repeated. "Will you watch them fight the brave bulls in the arena?"

An odd expression crossed her face. "Isn't that curious?" she said.

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"Isn't what curious?"

"I have no idea what I'll do in Spain . . . but you've read all my books, so *you* know."

"You don't want me to tell you," I said.

"No, that would spoil it."

"I'll miss you when you leave."

"You'll pick up one of my books and I'll be right back here," she said. "Besides, I went more than seventy-five years ago."

"It gets confusing," I said.

"Don't look so depressed. We'll be together again."

"It's only been a week, but I can't remember what I did with my evenings before I started talking to you."

The squabbling at the lake got louder, and Giggle and Goggle began huddling together.

"They're frightening my cats," said Priscilla.

"I'll go break it up," I said, climbing down from the veranda and heading off to where the raccoons were battling. "And when I get back," I added, feeling bolder the farther I got from her, "maybe I'll find out just how real you are after all."

By the time I reached the lake, the fight was all but over. One large raccoon, half a fish in its mouth, glared at me, totally unafraid. Two others, not quite as large, stood about ten feet away. All three were bleeding from numerous gashes, but it didn't look as if any of them had suffered a disabling injury.

"Serves you right," I muttered.

I turned and started trudging back up to the house from the lake. The cats were still on the veranda, but Priscilla wasn't. I figured she'd stepped inside to get another iced tea, or perhaps use the bathroom—one more factor in favor of her not being a ghost—but when she didn't come out in a couple of minutes I searched the house for her.

She wasn't there. She wasn't anywhere in the yard, or in the old empty barn. Finally I went back and sat down on the porch swing to wait.

A couple of minutes latter Goggle jumped up on my lap. I'd been idly petting him for a couple of minutes before I realized that he was real.

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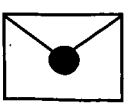

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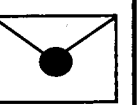

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* * *

I bought some cat food in the morning. I didn't want to set it out on the veranda, because I was sure the raccoons would get wind of it and drive Giggle and Goggle off, so I put it in a soup bowl and placed it on the counter next to the kitchen sink. I didn't have a litter box, so I left the kitchen window open enough for them to come and go as they pleased.

I resisted the urge to find out any more about Priscilla with the computer. All that was really left to learn was how she'd died, and I didn't want to know. How *does* a beautiful, healthy, world-traveling woman die at thirty-four? Torn apart by lions? Sacrificed by savages? Victim of a disfiguring tropical disease? Mugged, raped, and killed in New York? Whatever it was, it had robbed her of half a century. I didn't want to think of the books she could have written in that time, but rather of the joy she could have felt as she traveled from one new destination to another. No, I very definitely didn't want to know how she died.

I worked distractedly for a few hours, then knocked off in midafternoon and hurried home. To her.

I knew something was wrong the moment I got out of my car. The porch swing was empty. Giggle and Goggle jumped off the veranda, raced up to me, and began rubbing against my legs as if for comfort.

I yelled her name, but there was no response. Then I heard a rustling inside the house. I raced to the door, and saw a raccoon climbing out through the kitchen window just as I entered.

The place was a mess. Evidently he had been hunting for food, and since all I had were cans and frozen meals, he just started ripping the house apart, looking for anything he could eat.

And then I saw it: *Travels with My Cats* lay in tatters, as if the raccoon had had a temper tantrum at the lack of food and had taken it out on the book, which I'd left on the kitchen table. Pages were ripped to shreds, the cover was in pieces, and he had even urinated on what was left.

I worked feverishly on it for hours, tears streaming down my face for the first time since I was a kid, but there was no salvaging it—and that meant there would be no Priscilla tonight, or any night until I found another copy of the book.

In a blind fury I grabbed my rifle and a powerful flashlight and killed the first six raccoons I could find. It didn't make me feel any better—especially when I calmed down enough to consider what she would have thought of my bloodlust.

I felt as if morning would never come. When it did, I raced to the office, activated my computer, and tried to find a copy of Priscilla's book at www.abebooks.com and www.bookfinder.com, the two biggest computerized clusters of used book dealers. There wasn't a single copy for sale.

I contacted some of the other book dealers I'd used in the past. None of them had ever heard of it.

I called the copyright division at the Library of Congress, figuring they might be able to help me. No luck: *Travels with My Cats* was never officially copyrighted; there was no copy on file. I began to wonder if I hadn't dreamed the whole thing, the book as well as the woman.

Finally I called Charlie Grimmis, who advertises himself as The Book

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Detective. He does most of his work for anthologists seeking rights and permissions to obscure, long-out-of-print books and stories, but he didn't care who he worked for, as long as he got his money.

It took him nine days and cost me six hundred dollars, but finally I got a definitive answer:

Dear Ethan:

You led me a merry chase. I'd have bet halfway through it that the book didn't exist, but you were right: evidently you did own a copy of a limited, numbered edition.

Travels with My Cats *was self-published by one Priscilla Wallace (d. 1926), in a limited, numbered edition of 200. The printer was the long-defunct Adelman Press of Bridgeport, Connecticut. The book was never copyrighted or registered with the Library of Congress.*

Now we get into the conjecture part. As near as I can tell, this Wallace woman gave about one hundred and fifty copies away to friends and relatives, and the final fifty were probably trashed after her death. I've checked back, and there hasn't been a copy for sale anywhere in the past dozen years. It's hard to get trustworthy records farther back than that. Given that she was an unknown, that the book was a vanity press job, and that it went only to people who knew her, the likelihood is that no more than fifteen or twenty copies still exist, if that many.

Best,
Charlie

When it's finally time to start taking risks, you don't think about it—you just do it. I quit my job that afternoon, and for the past year I've been criss-crossing the country, hunting for a copy of *Travels with My Cats*. I haven't found one yet, but I'll keep looking, no matter how long it takes. I get lonely, but I don't get discouraged.

Was it a dream? Was she a hallucination? A couple of acquaintances I confided in think so. Hell, I'd think so too—except that I'm not traveling alone. I've got two feline companions, and they're as real and substantial as cats get to be.

So the man with no goal except to get through another day finally has a mission in life, an important one. The woman I love died half a century too soon. I'm the only one who can give her back those years, if not all at once then an evening and a weekend at a time—but one way or another she's going to get them. I've spent all my yesterdays and haven't got a thing to show for them; now I'm going to start stockpiling her tomorrows.

Anyway, that's the story. My job is gone, and so is most of my money. I haven't slept in the same bed twice in close to four hundred days. I've lost a lot of weight, and I've been living in these clothes for longer than I care to think. It doesn't matter. All that matters is that I find a copy of that book, and someday I know I will.

Do I have any regrets?

Just one.

I never touched her. Not even once. ○

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TV TEA

The teabag video doesn't say what kind of tea–
Just what show is dried inside.
A little still of the lead actors
Is printed on the packet.
When you drop the bag in to steep,
The show takes shape and acts itself
Against the surface of the tea.

In trance you scry
Your favorite episode.

If you drink your tea too fast
Do you miss the ending?
Is the tea cold before you get to the credits?
If you put it in the microwave a minute
Does the tea reset
And the show start over?
Is there any way to get to the back
And a happy ending
Before the cup is gone?

Dreams aren't that consistent.
I don't know.
I think the tea was jasmine.

–Ruth Berman

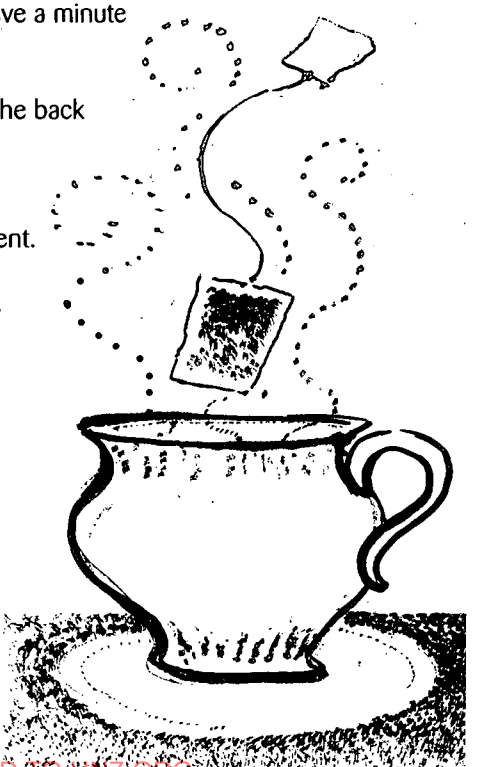

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Illustration by June Levine

ROMANCE FOR AUGMENTED TRIO

Tom Purdom

This is the fourth novelette in Tom Purdom's series about a future Casanova. He tells us he's been fascinated by the real Casanova ever since he first encountered him in an essay by a writer named Hector Bolitho that he read when he was a teenager. "I've really enjoyed writing these stories. I've always liked people who enjoy life and Casanova was one of history's greatest enjoyers."

I knew there was something wrong as soon as I took my eyes off Ganmei's face and looked at her clothes. She was wearing the loose shirt-and-shorts combination she usually wore when she went about her everyday business on the ship. In the past, she had always put on something special when she had activated my baseline personality—my normal personality, as my old-fashioned brain still thought of it. The last time she had brought me back she had been wearing a black form-fitting gown that sheathed her in the glitter of the High Cold War period.

I stared at her while her litany of disaster flowed across my brain. Our ship had been taken over . . . twenty robots of unknown origin now occupied the outside of the hull . . . the robot invaders had destroyed every long range antenna on the hull . . . it had been almost three tendays since she had received any incoming messages . . . or sent any messages out.

It was a disorienting moment. Ganmei had started firing information at me as soon as she had turned off the music-obsessed secondary personality I had chosen when we had left the asteroid belt six years earlier. One minute I had been standing in my music bower, completely absorbed in my interactions with the shadows who were playing the flute and harp parts in Claude Debussy's sonata for flute, viola, and harp. Then I had

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heard Ganmei's voice repeating the trigger words over the intercom. And all the feelings she aroused had flooded through my consciousness.

She waved her hand at the wheeled boxes positioned near an emergency hatch. "I've fabricated forty-two armed robots. They're standing by all over the ship. I'm going to launch an attack as soon as we get settled into the control room."

She studied my face. "You do understand, don't you? I'm not going too fast for you?"

I shook my head. "The only problem I'm having now is a perfectly reasonable difficulty adjusting my emotions. I had assumed you returned me to my baseline state so we could enjoy another few days together. It's been almost twelve tendays since our last interlude. Instead, I'm listening to you tell me we've become the captives of some mysterious aggressor. I take it you thought I'd be better off if I went on fiddling while you prepared to wage war."

"I felt I had to bring you back to baseline before I actually started the combat phase. You obviously have to be functioning at your optimal level if anything goes wrong. But I didn't see any point in bringing you back earlier."

We had been talking in a high speed synthetic language called CM—a Latin-based, very compressed language the members of Ganmei's genetic cohort had developed for their own use. Ganmei had developed a learning program and an auxiliary intelligence file especially for me and I had gritted my teeth and applied myself. We used CM whenever we discussed practical matters or anything that didn't require a lot of emotional communication. Now she rested her hand on my shoulder and switched to ordinary, day to day Techno-Mandarin.

"I'm sorry if it was the wrong thing to do. It was a hard judgment to make. I could have used some company."

She really was a magnificent creature. You couldn't spend an hour with her without realizing that big leaps in intelligence affected the entire human personality. She was still only in her forties, but she had mapped out most of my emotional makeup before we had spent two tendays together. Her fingers were pressing on my shoulder with a grip that managed to be comradely and suggestive at the same time.

Her parents had opted for gracefulness rather than strength and endurance when they had planned her. She had spent most of her childhood in the asteroid belt, but she had been born on Earth and she had a rangy sturdiness that reflected the influence of both her youthful environments. She was a head taller than me, in spite of the extra length I had added to my legs. A lot of the women I've courted have lived a little closer to the ceiling than I do. My lack of height can be an advantage. I don't make them feel dominated or overpowered.

Her intelligence and her physical attributes were an important part of her appeal. I wouldn't have sought her out if she hadn't possessed them. But they weren't the primary reason I had decided to spend fifteen years of my life span on a trip to the outer edge of the solar system. She had beguiled me before I had even seen her picture. I had been exploring the databanks and I had stumbled on an interview transcript in which she had described her Kuiper Belt project.

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It would take forty years to reach the Kuiper Belt if you used a minimum energy trajectory, Ganmei had told the interviewer. *And another forty years to get back. I'm going to get there in five. When I reach the Belt, I'll have just enough reaction mass left to match orbits with a suitable Kuiper Object—preferably a large object that's made entirely of water ice. I'll take on the water as reaction mass and spend two or three years in the belt, fabricating the telescope array out of the materials I'll find there. Then I'll attach the ship to another suitable object and head for home. The second object will give me so much reaction mass I'll make the homebound trip in three years and still be able to brake when I approach the asteroids.*

So your whole plan depends on your ability to use the material in the Kuiper Belt?

That's what makes it a viable project—something I can handle all by myself. I'm a little surprised I'm the only person who's thought of it. It seems like such an obvious idea.

You're telling me you're going to play games with multi-megaton objects. And you feel that's obvious?

Most of the women I've loved have been exceptionally intelligent. Many have been graceful (though a certain vulnerable clumsiness has its charms, too). Ganmei had audacity and imagination. She had conceived the entire project on her own. She had built her ship with almost no help. She had plowed through the international bureaucracies that authorize the private use of nuclear material. She would have made the whole trip by herself if I hadn't come along and offered her a more humane possibility.

I wasn't surprised that she had decided she should leave me in my private musical world and deal with a mysterious military assault by herself. I could have complained, but why resist the effects of the hand fondling my shoulder?

"Have you received any messages from the people behind this?" I said. "Have they given you any idea what they want?"

"I've received four messages from the Voice of a ship. It claims it's relaying the words of its 'organic colleague.' Here's the first one."

She gave our ship an order and a picture of the exterior of our hull appeared on a wall screen. The camera zoomed in and settled on three wheeled vehicles. A Voice boomed out of a loudspeaker.

I covered my ears. "Is it always that loud?"

"Always."

The Voice sounded harsher and more masculine than the Voices of most of the machines I've listened to over the years. It was advising Ganmei that our ship was now under its control.

"Your communications outlets and your thrusters have all been destroyed," the Voice proclaimed. "The machines that have occupied your surface area are now installing a new thruster system—a system I and my organic colleague will control. Your ship is now a prison. You and your peculiar companion are now its prisoners in residence."

"It just happened," Ganmei said. "All at once. Suddenly I had no contact with the world outside the ship. Then I received that message. I tried to send answers over our internal communications system. I asked them what they wanted. I didn't hear a thing for five more days."

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She gave our own Voice another order and I listened while it played the other three messages. In the third message the other Voice let us know we could be imprisoned in our ship for decades. In the fourth it said we would be here as long as its organic colleague wanted to hold us captive.

I lowered my head and thought. I had learned to take my time when I discussed anything important with Ganmei. It was a little like a handicap in a game—I got to use ten units of time for every unit she devoted to the conversation. I was consuming the best intelligence enhancers anyone had been able to design for me but she still made me feel like a plodding adolescent trying to dance with a star ballerina.

"Did you make them any offers? Money? Sex?"

"I just asked them what they wanted. I started fabricating my own army right after I got the first message. I responded to the Voice primarily because I was afraid they might realize I was preparing a counter-attack if I didn't make some attempt to negotiate with them. I thought I might gain some information. But so far I haven't heard anything that sounded particularly useful."

I looked around the room. I had spent six years on the ship without feeling restricted or confined. Ganmei had a good eye. The greenery she had chosen surrounded us with life and complexity. She had interwoven eight different species when she had arranged the vines that covered the ceiling. The floor plants bloomed in a complicated mix of cycles that created an unpredictable medley of moods and colors.

"You're feeling it, too," Ganmei said.

"All at once—it's a cage. A cell. Even with you here."

"We can't stay out here forever. I might make it through another three or four decades without a major medical problem. At your age—even in the condition you're in—you probably can't go more than twenty years without developing a problem that requires the services of a major medical complex."

"You must have used up a lot of our materials fabricating the new robots."

"I recycled most of the robots I've been using on the telescopes along with a lot of our exercise equipment. I'm afraid we're going to be short on amenities. I'm hoping I'll be able to refabricate the work robots once we break free. But I decided it was silly to worry about that now. Our first priority is to break free."

I nodded. I could think of objections to the whole idea of an all out mechanized brawl. What would she do, for example, if she cleared the enemy from our ship and our mysterious captor responded with another force that was just as large as the first?

"You're ready to attack now?" I asked.

"Everything is in place. I'm ready to start as soon as you feel you can handle the stress."

"Then let's go."

How could I argue with her? Her basic, unenhanced brain was supposed to be five times better than the fully enhanced, late-twentieth-century-model housed in my skull. And I had received ample proof that it really was.

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We took the elevator to the control room. Ganmei strapped herself into the pilot's couch and I settled into the spectator/minor-assistant couch she had added to the plans when she had decided fifteen years of celibacy might, after all, be a trifle tedious.

My secondary personality had been Ganmei's idea. I could have spent long periods in induced hibernation, but that would have required some maintenance work on her part.

I was supposed to spend approximately two years as my charming, irresistibly enamored self. That was about the length of time my longest love affairs had lasted. Every few tendays, as her schedule (and her inclinations) allowed it, Ganmei would reactivate my baseline personality and we would enjoy a romantic idyll. My memories of the times we had spent together over the last six years were an uninterrupted series of dinners, long talks, and sexual interludes that were a feast of tenderness, good humor, and sensuality. The rest of the time, I had stayed in my own quarters, out of her way, and my secondary personality had happily spent its days poring over scores and working its way through the violin literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It had been Ganmei who had suggested I switch musical periods. I had installed a performance system in my nervous system back in the 2030s, when I had fallen in love with a woman who spent all her leisure hours playing Baroque music on the flute. I had taken up the short-necked Baroque violin so I could join her social circle. For most of the next hundred years, I had reveled in eighteenth century music—especially the music of Bach. Ganmei had felt my secondary might be happier exploring something new, and she had been right. The switch to the longer-necked nineteenth century violin had only required a minor adjustment in the information molecules I had implanted during my last upgrade. I could even play the viola—and lose myself in Debussy's wonderful exercise in tone color and musical complexity.

"Would you like me to run through the overall battle plan?" Ganmei asked.

"I think I'd just as soon get started."

"I've been wargaming it every moment I had. There's usually some moments when it looks like our side is done for."

"I'll keep that in mind."

A schematic of our ship appeared on my screen. Red symbols showed me where her electronic warriors would pour out of the hatches. Five of the symbols were located on the wheel. The sixth was just behind us, in the part of the hub that separated the control room from the nuclear pile.

The wheel on the screen was turning at the same rate the real wheel turned. Near the bottom of the rim, I could make out the location of the bower where I had been playing Debussy just a few minutes before. The six squads were supposed to erupt from their hatches simultaneously. The individual robots were all equipped with gripping devices, so they could maneuver on the tubes that connected the wheel to the hub.

Ganmei had settled into a high-powered external brain-machine inter-

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face. Her face had disappeared behind a featureless black visor. Molded red ceramic covered the rest of her head.

Red symbols flowed out of the six hatches on my schematic. Yellow symbols marked the positions of the enemy machines as the sensors on our robots picked them up. Three of the hatches were small openings designed for single-person emergency exits. Our robots had to squeeze through those hatches two at a time. It looked to me as if the enemy was responding with a fast buildup in front of each hatch.

Something happened I didn't understand. Somehow one of our squads broke through its opposition. It spread out behind the enemy and the table on top of my screen added six enemy machines to its "destroyed" tally. I glanced at Ganmei but the only emotional signal I could pick up was the tension in her hands as she gripped the arms of her couch.

After that the battle spread over the entire surface of the ship. None of it made any tactical sense to me. There were times when I thought I understood a small skirmish. Then one of the robots would suddenly lurch off in an unexpected direction or break off combat just when I thought it was about to score. And I would stare at the screen and wonder what had happened.

I had once spent a few tendays pretending I was seriously interested in learning to play go. Now I felt as if I was watching two grandmasters. Ganmei and her opponent could consider the obvious thoughts my brain produced, calculate the other player's best counter-move, and come up with combinations that would thwart possibilities I couldn't follow even if they were explained to me step by step. The only aspect of the situation I could grasp was the numbers that tallied the losses. Two hours after the battle started, Ganmei had destroyed sixteen of the enemy's robots and lost twenty of hers. By the end of the third hour, the score was eighteen to twenty-five in her opponent's favor.

She spent the last thirty minutes guiding two robots through a desperate game of hide and seek, shooting from ambush as she tried to destroy a few more enemy machines before her own machines joined the final casualty list. The Voice of the enemy ship boomed through our loudspeakers seconds after her last robot fired its last projectile.

"You have once again demonstrated the futility of genetically enhanced intelligence. You have been contending with a machine that is infinitely superior to the limited organ you carry in your skull. Your existence is based on an arrogant fallacy. The future belongs to machine brains guided by human minds. The best genetically enhanced brains will always be inferior to the best machines. Your arrogance has led you into an evolutionary dead end. The lessons of history teach us. . . ."

This time, the message ran on for almost twenty minutes. I would have turned it off long before it ended, but I knew that rants like that could provide you with useful clues to the personality behind them. This one contained fourteen repetitions of the word "arrogant."

Ganmei didn't raise her visor until the harangue finally came to a stop. Her head slumped forward as soon as I removed the interface from her hands.

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When I was in my eighties, I read the complete memoirs of Giacomo Casanova, the legendary eighteenth century lover. People had been comparing us ever since my escapades had first appeared in the databanks and I had decided I should see if there was any justice in their claims. In many ways, there was. We both could say we truly fell in love with every woman we pursued. The emotion might not last, but it was real. Casanova obviously believed—as I do—that a feeling like that is worth all the turmoil it can inflict on its connoisseurs.

The most heart-wrenching part of his memoirs had been his description of his confinement in an infamous Venetian prison. He had escaped after fifteen months but he could have been caged in his cell for half a decade, at a time when he was still in his twenties. What would years of imprisonment have done to a man of his temperament, at that period of his life?

I would have Ganmei, of course. I wouldn't be womanless. But how would I feel about her as the years dragged on? How would she feel about me? My life had been a dance that whirled me from one partner to another. From the time I had been seven years old, I had been immersed in an unbroken succession of faces, touches, enchantments, and longings. What would I do if the dance suddenly stopped?

My secondary personality wouldn't offer me a satisfactory hiding place, either. Up to now it had been an innocuous way to pass the time between pleasant interludes. Now it would be an escape from an intolerable situation. I would feel as if I was committing suicide every time I activated it.

We returned to the wheel and dropped onto a couch in Ganmei's quarters. We spent most of the next hour sitting side by side, fitfully holding hands.

Thirty years before, a very bright young man had offered me some insights into criminal psychology. He was the son of one of the more gracious women I've become involved with and he had helped me escape a trap set by a woman who had been enticed by the numbers in my investment account. Our unknown captor seemed to fit the standard model for serial killers and serial rapists. He seemed to be primarily interested in domination and control—not sex or money or any of the other bonbons he could have demanded. Historically, criminals like that tended to be men who felt inferior or socially rejected. They struck at women who had superior status—women who would normally ignore them.

Ganmei obviously met the victim criteria. The "organic colleague," on the other hand, had just defeated her in a head-to-head clash of intellects. He had assembled a ship that was just as good as Ganmei's and followed her to the outer reaches of the solar system. You could even argue that he had overcome more obstacles than Ganmei, when you took into account the illegal aspects of his activities. Ganmei was the only person in the databanks who had ever received legal permission to use nuclear material to fuel an expedition to the Kuiper Belt.

He had done all that, however, with the help of a brain-machine interface. Every message he had transmitted had indicated he couldn't compete with her without the help he received from his Voice.

I had been watching people with genetically enhanced intelligences for over fifty years. The first one I had fallen in love with had been a reserved, incredibly competent young woman named Ling Chime. She had

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spent her childhood thinking that she was a major advance in the intellectual development of the human species. Then she had discovered the genetic designers had just been warming up when they had tripled the human intelligence. She had been in her thirties when we met. She had spent most of her life in a mild depression—a tepid, emotional backwater in which she skulked on the fringes of things, convinced she was merely a trial version of the people who were going to "replace" her.

If someone like Ling could react that way, why couldn't there be a few males whose anger would drive them across the orbits of every planet in the solar system? The human race was struggling through another period of turmoil and adjustment. The advances in medicine that had taken place during the twenty-first century had given us life spans that could encompass centuries. Any disease could be cured. Any defect could be ameliorated. Yet, at the same time, the biological wizards had created a world in which we could spend all those centuries in the company of people who possessed intellectual and physical powers that made us look like primitive, twentieth century versions of the latest software.

I started talking primarily because I knew we had to start working our way back to a functional mood. Unfortunately Ganmei immediately perceived the obvious corollary to my theoretical ramblings. "You're describing someone who could be very difficult to deal with, Joe. If you're right—if he's only interested in dominating and controlling me—then I don't have anything to bargain with. He's already got everything he wants."

Her voice sounded as distant—and weak—as the sun looked when I viewed it on one of our screens. Ganmei was a mature woman by the standards of the world that had shaped my childhood, but she had been sheltered from some of the rougher realities of human behavior. She had spent most of her life with her own kind. Her parents had bought her the best brain on the market and cultivated her potential with a full time post-natal environment that had surrounded her with "intellectually stimulating experiences" and "cognitively challenging peers." Her sexual partners had all been young men who were her intellectual equals. Her relationships with them had been pleasant but emotionally mild. Then she had become absorbed in the construction of her ship and her preparations for her big project. This was the first time she had confronted the psychological disasters that could bedevil people who had been formed by the random workings of genetics and childhood experience.

"I was just giving you the benefit of my knowledge," I said. "I have the utmost confidence in your ability to put it to good use."

She twisted around on the couch. Her fingers slid along the side of my face. "I think it's time we both shut off our brains for awhile. And I took advantage of your vast experience in other areas. Do you think you can do that? I'll start looking for a new approach tomorrow. I promise."

I didn't think someone like Ganmei could shut off her brain. But everybody reaches an emotional limit sooner or later. For the next thirty minutes she managed to produce a convincing simulation of a warm, mammalian lump. She dropped off to sleep as soon as I slipped off her. She didn't wake up for almost half a day cycle.

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Ganmei started working on a new escape program as soon as she consumed one of the enormous breakfasts she seemed to require. Our problem could be divided into two phases, she announced. First, she had to maneuver our captor into a face to face meeting. Then she had to get him under control.

The second phase, she decided, could be handled in her laboratory, where she would develop a new class of molecular machines. We had to assume our enemy would subject us to a thorough skin search if he ever let us enter his presence. She would evade his detectors with an anti-personnel mole that could be broken into six subunits. She would carry three subunits on each hand and they would recombine when she brought them together on his body.

"State of the art detection systems can detect combinations that are constructed from four subunits," Ganmei advised me. "No one, as far as I know, has ever made the jump to six-unit combinations. The big problem will be the time it takes them to assemble. I'm going to have to make an effort if I'm going to get that down to something reasonable."

It was exacting work that demanded a lot of testing and retesting. I could help her with some of it but I couldn't really follow it.

The other phase of her schemes would have been relatively simple if we'd had access to all the psychological material available in the public databanks. Criminal personalities tend to be relatively uncomplicated. We would have constructed a personality model in which we had some confidence and she would have tested approaches until she found something she could apply without worrying it might be counter-productive.

The information stored in our onboard databanks merely reinforced the general picture I had already sketched in. We spent most of our time analyzing the rants she had received and the messages she had tried to send back. He hadn't answered her messages, but that was information in itself. We knew his robots could pick up our messages if he was listening. Our ship's internal communication system could reach the area around the hull. She hadn't received an answer because he hadn't responded.

My major contribution was a suggestion that helped us move the modeling project off ground zero. "We've gotten everything we're going to get out of a model for the time being," I said. "Why don't we use some common sense? If there's a real live male on the other ship—and any human who does something like this is almost certainly male—then we know two things about him. He's been alone for over five years. And he's been womanless. Why don't you ask him some questions about himself? Why he's doing this? What kind of music he likes? Anything to get him talking."

She went back to her lab and I whiled away my time planning dinner. She had used up a lot of our raw materials building her robot army but the fabricators could still turn out decent wines. I had loaded my entire library of wine programs into our databanks before we left, in spite of Ganmei's belief that a small selection would be sufficient. She came out of the lab an hour after she left me and I listened while she recited the message she had composed while she had been working on her moles.

She had decided to ask him how he had managed to build his ship in complete secrecy all by himself. She would raise the subject, she said,

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with a nicely calculated combination of awe mingled with a hint of disbelief. Her words had been chosen with some care but she let her tone of voice carry most of the emotional content—the suggestion she was becoming fascinated by the cunning, mysterious being who had taken her captive and defeated her in combat.

We went over the message until we both felt she had struck the right balance between submissiveness and simple adventurer-to-adventurer curiosity. "I don't think you should make it too obvious," I said. "Let his imagination do some of the work."

His answer didn't reveal too many details. Mostly it was a long boast, with the Voice of his ship couching the whole diatribe in "my colleague feels" statements. But that was good enough. We had started a dialogue.

And once he'd started, he kept on—just as I'd hoped. He knew we were gathering information for a personality model. He even told us we should make sure we put certain facts into the model. We should note, he said, that he was the son of a demanding and possessive mother and a father who had disappeared before his third birthday. But he still couldn't stop talking. And the more he talked, the more Ganmei refined her approach.

She kept commenting on how trivial it all looked. "Every time I look at that model," she said, "I want to reach inside and make a few alterations. Adjust a couple of chemical pathways. Make some changes in his relationship with his mother. It all seems so *unnecessary*."

I had been born into a world in which children were molded by parental whims and biochemical accidents. To Ganmei, an environment like that seemed unimaginably primitive. With the psychological techniques we had developed over the last century, there was no reason why anyone should have to live with the kind of personality distortions displayed in our model. Most of the children born in the last fifty years had probably been endowed with parents who gave them the advantages that produced adults like her.

But most isn't all. We were still living in a society that was infinitely rougher and more chaotic than Ganmei's childhood milieu. Every year, thousands of children were still being brought into the world by parents who were irresponsible, or domineering, or just plain incompetent. If you added in all the people, like me, who had been born before the flowering of personality development techniques, you had to conclude that most of the people living in the solar system had been shaped by the forces that had buffeted developing personalities since the dawn of consciousness. We prescientific versions of humanity might have trouble living with Ganmei and her colleagues—but they were going to spend a long time living with *us*.

Up until now, I had seen Ganmei primarily during her recreational hours. I had agreed to that but it had left a big hole in our relationship. Now I felt I had truly made contact. I could listen to her while she explained her problems. I could feel the intellectual intensity she focused on the messages she composed. I gave her suggestions whenever I thought it might be helpful and watched her twirl my ideas around and transform two or three into approaches she could use.

Our recreational time took a different turn, too. We spent hours playing Bach together. On her own, Ganmei normally played music written in the

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last thirty years by genetically enhanced composers. Most of it seemed formless and fragmented to my mind, but I could understand why. For people with her kind of brain, it was a compressed musical language in which a few notes could be loaded with implications. When she turned to the music of the past, she usually played the scholarly literature written for the classic Chinese qin. Bach had produced the one body of work we could both relate to. His music had enough complexity to keep her interested and it was part of a tradition I had been exploring for over a century.

Ganmei had never purchased a performance system. She had taught herself to play the qin and all the standard keyboard instruments, without any help from implants. She played the harpsichord when we played Bach together—a small, beautifully constructed instrument I had selected for her when she had decided she could let me share her adventure. She usually chose the harpsichord when she sat by herself playing the music created by her intellectual equals.

When he finally did what we wanted, he couched it as an order—just as our model had predicted he would. Ganmei would report to his ship at once, he proclaimed. She resisted, naturally—and gave herself time to finish working on her moles.

She had originally planned to confront him by herself. I pointed out that I had more experience with violent situations, but she dismissed that argument out of hand. So I appealed to her concern for my welfare.

"What if he keeps you with him and abandons me? I'll be here all by myself. For decades. Maybe for the rest of my life."

"Without a female companion."

"Yes."

He laughed at her when she told him she wanted to bring me with her. Once again I had to listen to rants in which I was referred to as an "erotic convenience."

By this time, we had a model we thought we could trust. Ganmei displayed it on an oversize screen and scanned it while she assailed him with a series of pleadings, cajolings, and coquettish attacks of stubbornness. She responded to every subtle variation in the vectors and symbols on the model screen as if she were steering a high-speed vehicle through a particularly treacherous obstacle course. The real personality responded just like the model. And finally, after one last fifteen-minute harangue, generously announced that he was going to let me accompany my "controller."

I had done a little arguing myself and Ganmei had modified her original plan. I wasn't going to be defenseless. She had outfitted my hands with six-unit moles that could damage robots and other metal objects.

"I'd let you have anti-personnel moles," she had said apologetically. "But I didn't have time to come up with a completely different design that would do the same job. His security system might notice if it found the same unusual molecular fragments on both of us. This will be the only chance we'll have, Joe. We have to keep every risk to a minimum."

She had paid some attention to our communication implants, too. We wouldn't be able to relay through the communication system on the other ship, so she gave us a big increase in range—along with some carefully

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phrased instructions. "You'll feel the drain on your energy if you use the enhanced implant more than a few minutes. I'm going to upgrade your encryption program and modify the transmission program so it automatically crams everything into blips, but you shouldn't transmit any messages unless it's absolutely necessary. The blips and the encryption will slow up his cryptography system but his Voice will probably break the encryption minutes after it intercepts our first message. I'd be happier if you stayed off the air until you received something from me."

She was speaking very matter-of-factly but I still picked up the undertones. She was going to bring me with her but I was supposed to shut up and follow her instructions.

I smiled. "Is the communication package going to include some kind of anesthetic? So you can put me to sleep if I start doing something really stupid?"

"I thought about it."

She shrugged as she said it—a gesture that was just as winning as everything else she did. Then she put her hand on my shoulder.

"I just want to make sure I can keep us coordinated. We're dealing with someone who's already demonstrated he can defeat me. I can't forget that. He may be a mess psychologically. But he's still a match for me intellectually when he's working with his Voice."

I told her she could modify my implants in any way she wanted, of course. But I knew she felt uncomfortable. So I engaged in a little manipulation of my own and broached a contingency plan I had been pondering. If she couldn't get him under control, I suggested, I could try to reach the emergency communications system in his control room. The emergency system in a spacecraft is always set up so it operates outside the main computer system. If I could reach it, I could send a message to two of the brightest people I had ever known: Ling Chime and the young man, Sori Dali, who had briefed me on criminal psychology. I would tell them our situation and ask them to radio a computer virus to his ship. They both had the ability to design something that could slip past the best state-of-the-art security system.

Ganmei accepted the idea as soon as I suggested it but she let me know she had reservations. "It's something we should try only if we're really desperate, Joe. The time lag alone could invalidate the whole idea. Even if you actually managed to get a message out it would be five or six hours before it reaches either of them. Ten hours *minimum* before we receive a reply. If you add in the time it would take to create a virus—it might be two or three day cycles."

She believed me, however, when I told her I thought both of them would respond. "I might have thought you were crazy if I hadn't spent so much time with you," she said. "You're telling me you feel you can rely on a woman you were in love with over thirty years ago. And the son of a woman you were in love with just a few years later. And I haven't got the slightest doubt you probably can."

There were a number of women who wouldn't want to hear from me again. But it was nice to know she understood the friendly ones. We'd had some good times together—some of the best I'd ever had.

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This was the first time I had floated across several kilometers of open space in a pressure suit. There were moments when the grandeur of the scene managed to overwhelm the queasy sensations that troubled my stomach. At one point, I could actually see both ships at the same time, with their wheels majestically revolving around the long hubs that contained their control rooms and their propulsion units. Off to my right, there was a white disc that was a little bigger than my glove—the only natural object I could detect in all that emptiness. The Kuiper Belt may contain thousands of iceballs and planetoids, but it's just like the asteroid belt—when you're in it, the space around you normally looks empty.

The shipboard robots that met us at the airlock were built around a standard wheeled box that carried a few more arms and sensor poles than Ganmei's shipboard machines. It wasn't hard to spot the arms that housed their mole projectors. They remained fixed on us from the moment we squeezed through the hatch.

Our captor was sitting in a chair that had a high, thronelike back. He was—not unexpectedly—a pudgy man who should have spent more time with his exercise equipment. He was wearing a golden robe and—so help me!—red boots.

Two robots shepherded us to a spot directly in front of his chair. I caught a whiff of the scent he was wearing. His hair and his stubby blonde beard both looked as if they had been trimmed just a few minutes before we boarded the ship. His boots glowed like oiled machinery. His robe had the pristine, unwrinkled look of clothing that had just been removed from a fabricator.

The vegetation in the room was as utilitarian as his robots. A standard vine species ran across the ceiling. Undistinguished trees occupied a few spots. The flower bed tucked into one of the corners had borders that could have been plotted with a laser.

He nodded toward the robots. "I should advise you my serving machines are equipped with quick acting immobilization moles. I don't want to sound rude, but I felt I should warn you. I'm linked to every machine on this ship by way of the Voice. They'll respond the moment I think the appropriate command."

He pointed at Ganmei. "The door behind me is the door to my private bedroom. Go in the bedroom and take off your clothes."

Ganmei stared at him. She started to step back and the Voice of the ship boomed out of a loudspeaker.

"That was an order. Go in the bedroom. Take off your clothes."

Ganmei lowered her head. She stepped across the room with her hands clasped in front of her stomach and a robot followed her through the door.

A screen lit up on my right. Ganmei was standing in front of a bed. She bent forward and pulled her shirt over her head.

Our captor watched her intently. "I presume you and she have been enjoying the customary pleasures."

I drew myself up. I had decided I should act nonchalant and try to keep him talking but it was already beginning to take an effort.

"It depends on what you consider customary," I said.

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"Is there anything she's particularly good at? Anything you would recommend I have her do?"

"I'm afraid that's not an area in which I can give you much information. My sexual proclivities tend to be singularly prosaic—except for a tendency to place a ridiculously high value on certain kinds of emotions."

"You've been with this one for several years now. Isn't that unusual for you?"

"Actually, we've really only had a few tendays together. The rest of the time, I've been immersed in a secondary personality."

"And what exactly is your secret? How have you managed to befuddle so many women?"

I shrugged. "I'm afraid there's been a lot of them mostly because I can't seem to settle on one for very long."

"But I gather you don't seem to have any trouble manipulating them into giving you what you want."

"In practice, it doesn't normally require much manipulation."

"There's just something about you women find irresistible, is that it?"

"I try to give them a good time. I let them know how I feel about them. Most people like being the absolute center of someone else's life—at least for awhile."

"I'd rather *take* what I want," he said. "Isn't that the way it's supposed to be? The way human beings were *meant* to be?"

He slipped into one of his rants about genetically enhanced humans. Mankind didn't need the kind of biological divide they were creating, he proclaimed. Machines would always be superior to human brains.

"I've been working with machine intelligence since I was a child," he said. "There's no limit. Machine-assisted intelligence is the only future mankind can look forward to."

He had kept his eyes on the screen while he delivered his oration. His voice had risen as he reached the end, but he had gone on talking to me over his shoulder. Our model had indicated that he was looking for anxiety and inner torment and Ganmei was offering him a well-calculated display of both. She walked around restlessly. She sat on the edge of the bed with her head drooping. She stared at the door as if she was simultaneously afraid it would open and tired of waiting for it to open.

"Your companion seems restless," he said. "This must be a trying moment for a mind like hers. Isolated from her normal sources of intellectual stimulation. Forced to contemplate the trivial worries that preoccupy lesser intellects."

It was the most revealing thing he had said. Most of Ganmei's consciousness was probably absorbed in a couple of her intellectual preoccupations. She could have acted a complete scene from a classic drama while she was engaging in a detailed review of her plans for her telescope array. If he didn't know that, he didn't really understand the power of the cells packed in her skull.

You weren't aware she was thinking about other things when you were with her. You thought you were receiving all the attention a human personality could concentrate on you. Then she would say something that indicated another part of her brain had been developing a lengthy, complicat-

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ed train of thought. Once she had returned me to my baseline personality while she kept an eye on the robots that were constructing her second telescope. To me, she had been totally absorbed in all the things we had done. We had made love, we had talked, we had even played several games of go for some reason. And there hadn't been a moment, in all that time, when she had stopped watching the information the construction robots were pouring into her communications implant. She had even made a number of minor corrections in their programs.

Our tormentor stood up. He tipped back his head and smiled as he looked me over. "Perhaps it's time I gave you both something to think about."

You didn't need a personality model to predict his next moves. He left the camera on after he entered the bedroom, so I would have to watch his depredations. He ordered Ganmei to kneel. He told her he wanted to see what she could do with her mouth.

You could see the surprise on his face when she swayed to her knees in front of him. He stared down at her as if he were hypnotized. Ganmei put her hands on one of his silly boots and began kneading the material.

I started to turn my head away. Then I realized her fingers were working their way upward—toward the bare thigh above his boot.

Ganmei grabbed his robe as soon as his face started to slacken. She put her shoulder under his chest and used him as a shield as she stood up. It was a nice move but he had apparently transmitted an order before he lost consciousness. The robot rolled around the room faster than she could turn his body.

I had lunged at the robot next to me as soon as I had seen Red Boots react to Ganmei's anesthetic. My hands had reached for the arm that had been fitted with a projectile launcher. The robot fired at me at point blank range but I still managed to place my hands on each side of the arm and rub them up and down.

Ganmei's mole was an anesthetic. Her victim had slipped into unconsciousness. The moles the robots had fired at us were paralytics. I was still conscious but my limbs were frozen. Naturally Ganmei was the first to realize we were only paralyzed from the neck down. Her voice reached me over the loudspeaker seconds after the paralytic took effect.

She had developed some exceptionally powerful moles so there was some hope we would recover before Red Boots did. "Open the bedroom door and attack the robot as soon as we're both free," Ganmei said. "It will probably paralyze you again but I'll attack it while it's focused on you."

It was a reasonable idea but the robot in the bedroom vetoed it before I could take a step toward the door. It paralyzed her as soon as it detected the first involuntary movement she made when the paralytic wore off. Then it started rolling toward the door.

Ganmei didn't hesitate. "Turn around and head for the other door, Joe. *Now.* It looks like Plan B will have to do."

The wheel was a series of adjoining rooms, just like the wheel on our ship. The other door in the throne room connected to a room that housed the elevator we had used when the robots had herded us between the hub and the wheel. There were no manual controls on the elevator. I would

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have to use the emergency hatch located in the ceiling in front of the elevator door.

I've always had trouble visualizing the actual situation in spinning space environments. I like to feel that down is *down*. I don't like to think I'm standing inside the rim of a slowly turning wheel, with my head pointed toward a hub that contains a nuclear reactor, three huge rocket nozzles, and all the other gadgetry and wiring that gives me some hope I will eventually reach a more comprehensible destination.

In this case, I pulled myself *up* to enter the escape hatch. My muscles still felt they were climbing as they carried me along the ladder, but something in my head rebelled against the idea that the hub was up. I crawled toward my objective with my body telling me one thing and my brain telling me something else.

The shaft made a sharp turn and merged with the shaft that contained the elevator. The ladder ran along the tracks the elevator used. I could look "down" and see the top of the elevator car.

If there's one thing I know something about, it's the art of escape and evasion. When you've lived the way I have you acquire some experience with the stratagems of decamping. I stopped a few meters above the elevator car and rubbed my magic hands along one of the tracks. A section about the length of my forearm dissolved into dust and I continued on my way.

The car came to life a few seconds later. It whirred up the track and stopped with a satisfying bump when it hit the break in the track. Then I looked down and realized I hadn't been as smart as I thought. I had forgotten about the hatch in the roof.

I slipped off the ladder and let the spin carry me down to the car. I examined it for a couple of sweaty minutes—Ganmei would have known what to do as soon as she looked at it—and applied my hands. I eliminated another section of the ladder for good measure and kept going.

None of it would have worked if machines were as smart as Red Boots thought they were. A normal, unenhanced human would have realized I was trying to reach the hub and headed me off. Fortunately, our captor had given them an improvised message when he realized he was losing consciousness and the Voice of the ship had decided the robots were supposed to "pursue" me. They didn't catch up to me until I had reached the control room, located the emergency communications system, and transmitted six encoded microsecond blips. Five of the blips were all-points pleas for help, with a description of our situation. The fourth blip in the series was a special message for two very special people.

"They'll know we're here," I said. "Every authority in the solar system will know what you've done to us. They can probably figure out exactly who you are."

Red Boots looked at me as if he thought I was a lunatic. "Do you seriously think someone is going to put together a rescue expedition and come out here on a ten-year round trip? Just to look for you? Or a forty-year trip if you attract rescuers who feel they have to conserve their resources and do the job on the cheap."

"Ganmei is a public figure. She has admirers all over the system."

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"And they all know they could spend decades looking for you after they invested all that time coming here. It seems to me you went to a lot of trouble just to send a useless message. You may be intelligent, Ganmei, but you obviously aren't very creative."

"We thought we could get you under control," Ganmei said. "Obviously it was a foolish idea."

She had been propped against a wall of the bedroom, still naked and paralyzed. His robots had hit her with a third dose of the paralytic when she had recovered from the second dose a few minutes after he regained consciousness.

"Your little friend may feel it was especially foolish. I've been moving your ship close to a small ice object. My machines have already started transferring reaction mass to your tanks. In approximately twelve hours, I'm going to return him to your ship and propel him to the outer edge of the belt, where he'll take up a long, slow orbit around the sun."

"That's murder," Ganmei said. "He'll die if you leave him out there, cut off from medical treatment."

"For *you,* I'm preparing a very pleasant boudoir. Our relationship may be a little unusual since it seems I can't touch you without incurring some risk. But I presume I and my ship will eventually develop some kind of counter mole."

"There are even things you can do before then," I said. "I've been in two or three similar situations myself."

On the screen, I could see Ganmei start. She lowered her head and stared at the floor.

Red Boots frowned at me. "I thought you only performed for willing partners."

I gave him an airy wave of my hand. "There have been times when I was physically cut off from the person who had captured my fancy. There was a time when I was in my fifties—a period when I seem to have been especially inclined to engage in sentimentality—when I fell in love with a woman who had been confined to a completely sterile environment. She was a biodesigner. One of her mistakes had done some strange things to her immune system. I thought I was merely offering her a little long distance companionship when I first contacted her. Then I discovered my feelings were more erotic than I had realized."

"And you actually engaged in some form of sexual activity?"

"It was much more satisfying than you would think. For human beings, *talk* is a very important aspect of sexual pleasure. Talk and feeling. If you can talk—and you have the right feelings—all kinds of acts can seem quite soul stirring."

I had blurted out my first story on an impulse but I had been almost certain it would capture his attention. It wasn't the first time I've met a man who wanted to hear everything I could tell him. Usually I don't spend a lot of time recounting my romantic adventures. For one thing, I tend to become engrossed in the next one as soon as the last one ends. But we all feel the need to spend a little time talking about the part of our life that is special and important. Soldiers talk about war. Musicians chatter about music.

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He knew I was trying to extend my stay, of course. He started calling me Scheherezade.

"Tell me another story, Sherry. See how long you can delay the inevitable—the moment when I send you to a place where your memories will be your only consolation. Or did you bring a few shadows to help you entertain yourself when your hyper-intelligent paramour was engrossed in her engineering project?"

I used up both of my sex-at-a-distance experiences by the end of the first day cycle. When I went to bed that night, the Voice of the ship reminded me I could be awakened at any time and returned to Ganmei's ship. The next morning, when he invited me to breakfast, I told him that my romance with a famous ballerina had been more eccentric than the information in the databanks indicated. "She used to dance for me when we were alone," I lied. "That was all she would ever do."

"And you just sat there and watched her, Sherry?"

"She had me choose her costumes. I picked her costumes and I choreographed her dances from a list of ballet movements she gave me. She said she had a problem with actual physical contact."

"But she wanted to place herself under your control? She had broken through her superficial social conditioning and yielded to her female need to be controlled?"

"I suppose you could look at it that way."

His eyes moistened. "How about nudity? Did your choice of costumes include nudity?"

"Of course."

As I had hoped, he decided that would be just the kind of thing he should do with Ganmei. This time, he turned off the camera when he disappeared into the bedroom.

I stood by the big chair—it was the only chair in the room—and retreated into imaginary conversations with Ganmei. The real torment in this situation was my inability to communicate with her. I could assume she understood what I was doing. But did she approve? Did she understand I didn't normally think about those kinds of fantasies? Would she feel she had exposed a different side of my personality?

"I couldn't have handled this without you," Ganmei had told me several times. "I probably would have been completely baffled by his personality structure. I can build the models. I can understand the theory. But I can't really understand what he's feeling. I feel like I'm trying to understand someone who belongs to a different species."

"That's just a matter of experience," I had argued. "You've been absorbed in technological and scientific matters all your life."

"Can you understand it? Can you actually relate his feelings to anything *you* feel?"

"I've met a lot of people in the last hundred and thirty years. I've never felt any great need to control other people myself. I'm basically a pleasure-oriented person and that's all I ever will be. But I've known plenty of people who obviously have to spend their lives making other people do things. Human sexuality—especially male sexuality—is a complicated business. It can get mixed up with a lot of other things."

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"I don't think I'll understand it if I live a whole millennium," Ganmei had insisted. "Not emotionally. It just seems so *stupid*."

I had wrestled with a surge of irrational emotion when we passed the tenth hour. I had promised myself I wouldn't start worrying until we had waited at least thirty hours for an answer.

The dancing fantasy kept Red Boots occupied for most of the morning. He ate lunch sitting in his big chair while I stood a few steps to one side.

"Tell me another story, Sherry. Add to my stock of wisdom."

I could have felt some sympathy for him under other circumstances. He had obviously developed one of the three alternate personality structures predicted by our model (and by ordinary, reasonably well-informed observation of human behavior). He couldn't approach a woman unless he believed he was in absolute control of the situation.

He had verified most of the assumptions in our model when he had selected an immobilizer that paralyzed its victims from the neck down. Ganmei had been absolutely powerless when she had been paralyzed but she had still been conscious and he could still make her respond.

A competent personality modification technician could have given him a new life in a single tenday. Ganmei's assessment had been right on target. Strengthen the chemistry of assertiveness, remove the accidental conditioning that made him feel women would reject him—and you would have a human male with a totally intact ability to approach a human female and suggest they have dinner together. Instead, he had clung to the damaged personality structure he had acquired from the haphazard interplay of his genes and his childhood environment.

He lolled on his chair. He gorged on the fruits and pastries arranged on a serving cart. He nodded knowingly when I reached critical points in my narratives. He reminded me that my ultimate destiny was a womanless isolation.

"Work, Sherry. Make it good. Hold off the inevitable for another hour."

But he did listen. He was one of the easiest audiences I could have asked for. I had thrown out a few probes when I started my story telling, to see how much he knew. After that, I knew he would accept any erotic detail I offered him. How would he know it couldn't be true? There are things you can't learn from shadows.

You could have summed up the essence of his personality structure with one sentence: he was trying to turn a real woman into a pixel shadow. Real women have desires and needs of their own. Shadows have the needs and desires you give them.

Ganmei knew that, too, and she seemed to be giving him what he wanted. His third session in the bedroom lasted almost six hours. He dropped into his chair when he came out and folded his hands over his stomach as if he had just eaten a particularly satisfying meal.

"Your advice has been very helpful, Sherry. Very helpful. I probably should have left the camera on—so you'd know exactly what we're going to be doing while you putter around in your empty ship for the next forty or fifty years. Perhaps you can console yourself by writing your memoirs. Like that legendary character they keep comparing you to."

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I let him see my anguish. It gave him another incentive to keep me around.

If I were creating a video drama, I would drag out the suspense and pretend our salvation arrived just as I was being escorted to the airlock for my final transfer to Ganmei's ship. The truth was more mundane. The loudspeakers started booming while Red Boots and Ganmei were once again isolated in the bedroom. And I was standing beside the big chair planning my next set of lies.

"This is Sori, Joe. Your package has arrived. The password is the name of the composer who wrote the piece you were playing when you fell in love with the red-haired oboist in Hartford, Connecticut. Say the unforgettable name and it's all yours."

It had been thirty years since I had seen Sori. He had still been a tall, gangling twenty-plus, with a brain that never stopped churning and hormones that made him intensely aware he was surrounded by healthy women who had been interacting with men for more years than he had been alive. His voice sounded firmer and less bumptious but I could still hear his pleasure in the effect he knew it would create. If I understood the meaning of that final "It's all yours," he had sent me something better than a virus. The password would activate a program that would give me control of the ship.

Unfortunately, he had taken my romantic proclamations at face value. I knew what he was talking about when he referred to the red-haired oboist. I had told him about her when I had been chattering about my own youthful emotions. I'll never forget the name of the composer who wrote the piece we were playing when I fell in love with her, I had said. He was an obscure Baroque musicsmith, but I'll never forget his name.

I could remember saying that. I could remember my exact words. The one thing I couldn't remember was the composer's name.

It had been thirty years since I had mentioned him to Sori. It had been a *hundred years* since the incident itself. I couldn't even remember the *oboist's* name.

I've never kept count of my love affairs. I'm not a collector. But when you've been pursuing the same passion for a hundred and thirty years. . . . I'm afraid it does add up.

Hundreds of composers wrote sonatas and concertos between 1600 and 1750. Baroque enthusiasts had started mining the manuscript collections near the beginning of the twentieth century and they had kept it up all through the twenty-first. Every musician I had ever played with had doted on pieces no one else had ever heard of. I had even run into a harpsichordist who was relentlessly assembling ensembles so she could eventually say she had played the harpsichord part in every one of the 1500 cantatas Allesandro Scarlatti composed.

I couldn't think as fast as Ganmei and Red Boots, but years of experience had honed my fight or flight (mostly flight) reflexes. I'm happy to report that I had ducked behind the big chair while I had still been recognizing the problem Sori had unwittingly presented me. Boots had given his robots permanent orders after my last adventure had revealed the

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tricks I could play with my hands. They were supposed to stay at least six steps away from me.

It was a big gap when you didn't have a missile weapon of your own but I had a small psychological advantage: I had been expecting a message. Boots, on the other hand, had been distracted by the activities taking place in the bedroom. He responded a lot faster than I would have but I still had time to push the chair across the room and smash it into the robot before it could obey Boots' order and move into position for a shot. I slammed the robot into the wall and lunged for the door.

My communications implant belled as I reached the door. *What's the matter?* Ganmei asked. *Why haven't you given it the password?*

I can't remember the name. Sori has made a terrible mistake.

What are you doing? We have a standoff in here. I can't get near him. The robot has me covered.

I just pushed this robot against the wall with the chair. I'm going out the other door.

Can you block that door with the chair? Can you grab the bedroom door and hold it shut? Do it.

It was a moment when the conciseness of CM made all the difference. The blipped transmissions had bounced between us in seconds. I didn't know what she had in mind but I decided I should give her superior brainpower the benefit of the doubt. I shoved the chair against the door and leaped across the room toward the bedroom.

Can you remember what kind of piece you played? Concerto grossi? Trio sonata? Concerto?

My hands seized the handle that secured the bedroom door. The door I had just barricaded with the chair opened inward, toward me. The door to the bedroom opened away from me, toward the bedroom.

I think it was a trio sonata. Why?

Stand by.

I clutched the door handle and positioned myself along the wall, so I could pull up on the handle and keep the door closed. Boots threw his weight on the handle on the other side of the door and I leaned back and held on. He might be a lunatic but he had equipped his doors with hefty, oversized no-nonsense space ship door handles. I could grip the handle with both hands. The door handles on space ships are always built large, with total disregard to aesthetics, for the same reason most of the doors are manually operated. You don't trust your life to slippery doorknobs and electronic circuits that might fail at awkward moments.

My first impression of him had been correct. He had been lolling around with his computer when he should have been exercising. He might think I was just a sexual convenience but he was learning I had more primitive masculine virtues.

Scan this list. Say delete if you feel a name is well known.

"Release the door, Sherry. Release the door or your over-brained female friend will find out what it's like to be really helpless."

Names skimmed across my consciousness. Arne . . . Buxtehude . . . Cima. . . . The CM word for delete is short and sharp but the names were rushing by at a tempo that made me feel like I was trying to follow a run-

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away metronome. Ganmei had over-estimated my processing speed. I eliminated Arne and Buxtehude but Geminiani, Pepusch, and a dozen others slipped past me. The list contained at least ninety names. She had left off the obvious composers like Bach and Purcell but serious Baroque enthusiasts would have recognized half the list.

A noise behind me made me turn my head. Something was hitting the other door.

Your deletions have been executed. The list has been returned for further analysis.

I didn't know where Ganmei had obtained the list—or what she hoped to do with it. None of the unfamiliar names had jogged my memory. How could they? I was holding onto a door with a madman on the other side and the madman's robot assistants obviously gathering behind the other door.

My tug of war opponent tried a surprise release followed by a quick jerk. My body slipped along the wall but I managed to recover before he could force me off balance.

"I'm not going to tell you again, Sherry. Ganmei has just been immobilized. I can approach her without the slightest concern for my safety. I realize I can't overcome her pain control system with the equipment I have here in the bedroom. But there is no limit to the physical damage I can inflict."

Ignore him. Hold the door.

I glanced at the other door and flinched when I saw the chair move. It was a small shift—just enough to be noticeable—but even the genetically obsolete organ inside my skull could foresee the inevitable consequences.

I had been resisting the impulse to send transmissions that would interrupt what Ganmei was doing—whatever it was she was doing. But I had to make sure she understood the situation.

The robots are beginning to move the other door. They don't have to open it all the way—they can create a small crack and slip a projectile arm through it.

"We know you're transmitting, Sherry. We'll be reading everything you say in minutes. In spite of that exotic language you're using."

He always said *we* when he referred to himself and the ship's computer system. He already saw himself as a component in a composite personality.

Listen carefully. I'm going to give you three names. When you have them—push the door inward. Rush into the bedroom. His Voice has probably shut off the microphones in the room you're in. Rush in and try the names. If you get control—tell the system to obey me, too. Get him immobilized. Don't let him set up a hostage situation. Here are the names—Paganelli. Pampani. Bartiomei.

The big chair scraped against the floor. I could see the other door edging open.

I hadn't even thought about the possibility that the computer system could have turned off the mikes in the throne room. How long had it been since I had received Sori's message? Three minutes? Four? I had been shoved into a world in which everything seemed to be moving at megaspeeds. Ganmei had somehow come up with a list of composers and subjected it to some kind of analysis. And now I was supposed to blindly

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follow her instructions. In the same way I blindly trusted the decisions of computer programs when they manipulated my investments or guided the vehicles that carried me across years of vacuum.

I let go of the handle and pushed the door forward. I can even boast that I managed to do it with my eyes open. *Paganelli* isn't the most bloodthirsty war cry anyone ever uttered but it was backed up with a scream that should have unnerved a battalion of Mongols. Boots fell back as the door flew open. I saw his knees bend and tried to catch him in a bear hug.

Frontal attacks aren't my normal style—in love or war. The self-defense maneuvers I've acquired are all variations on techniques used in aikido—a martial art in which you turn your opponent's motion against him. In this case, however, I thought I would be better off if I tangled us together and presented the robot with a confusing target while I babbled the names Ganmei had picked.

His reaction time wasn't as fast as Ganmei's but it was good enough. He recovered his balance and skipped away from me before I had covered half the distance between us. He broke into the beginnings of a smile—the same patronizing smile he had bestowed on me when he listened to my stories.

I twisted toward him, bellowing the names of the other two composers. I could see the robot in the corner on my left. On my right, Ganmei was lying on the floor, with a flimsy white gown spread around her. Her useless arms and legs were sprawled at random angles. She had to lift her head off the floor to see what we were doing.

I screamed an alternate pronunciation of Paganelli and followed it with a squeaking, hysterical Pampani that emphasized the second syllable. Ganmei had accented the first syllable but that didn't mean Sori—or the computer system—had settled on the same choice. Most of the musicians I had played with seemed to pronounce the names of the less familiar composers according to their whims. I had been playing Baroque music for one hundred years and I still couldn't give you a definitive answer if you asked me if the name of England's most famous Baroque composer was pronounced *Pur*cell or Pur*cell*. I'd never met anyone else who could, either.

"Welcome, Joe," the loudspeaker said. "Please stand by while the installation procedure proceeds."

Don't try to grab him, Ganmei transmitted. *Stay between him and me.*

Ganmei could think faster than Red Boots but she was firing orders at a body that still retained the reaction time it had been issued when it was conceived in the last decade of the twentieth century. I managed to stop myself in midmotion but I stumbled when I tried to change course. I flopped down to one knee and scrambled to my feet with my arms flailing for balance.

Boots could have run straight at Ganmei while I had been fumbling. Instead, he had come to a sudden stop. His jaw had gone slack. He was staring at the air as if he was looking at a vision.

He's lost contact with the ship. He's disoriented.

The disorientation only lasted a few seconds—just long enough for me to edge sideways and place myself between him and Ganmei. Even with-

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out his computer link, he was still smarter and faster than the baseline human standing between him and a defenseless female body.

His face changed again. All his bland, roundfaced composure vanished as if he had rubbed it off with a towel. His face twisted into the most unnerving mask I've ever seen on a human head.

Just stay between us. That's all you have to do. He isn't armed but he can still make serious threats if he gets into position. That's his best bet at this point.

For the first time since we had come aboard, I was staring at the rage that had driven him all the way to the Kuiper Belt just so he could torment a human female. Ganmei didn't have to describe the things he could threaten. The creature poised in front of me could have shattered her skull with his feet. And tramped the fragments into the floor.

His mouth was wide open when he charged but he came at me with complete, unnerving silence. I dropped to one knee just before he hit and applied one of my self-defense techniques to his robe. I knew I was disobeying Ganmei—I was sending him *past* her, just a step from one of her feet. But I couldn't believe I could grapple with the emotional energies that had created that face.

He stumbled away from me but his reflexes were still functioning. He recovered before he hit the wall and started to turn. I slammed into him from the side and held on as if I was clinging to a lifeline. Teeth sank into my cheek. Knees jabbed at my groin. Hands pulled at my ears.

"Welcome, Joseph Louis Baske. This ship is now under your command. Your voice characteristics have been analyzed and recorded. You may issue your directions in any of the six accepted international languages."

"*Immobilize the man in the red boots! Have the robots fire paralyzer projectiles at the man in the red boots. Do it!*"

He was screaming into my ear when his body started to slacken. He was still screaming five minutes after the moles took effect.

Ganmei hadn't told me, but she had loaded every Baroque-related entry in the latest *Grove's* into her auxiliary memory before we had left the asteroid belt. There had been a number of occasions during our voyage when I had been impressed by her knowledge of Baroque music. I hadn't realized she had been running high speed searches while we conversed.

"I knew it was one of your major interests," she said. "I thought our conversations would work out better if I didn't have to keep asking you to explain things."

The whole brouhaha had lasted approximately five minutes, counting from the moment we had first heard Sori's announcement. In that time, she had pulled out all the composers' names in her Baroque files, eliminated the ones she immediately recognized, sent me the list of seventy, and reduced the remainder to eight names by applying half a dozen sieves based on her knowledge of my taste and attitudes. Then she had read the complete entries for all eight composers and reduced the list to three.

She had remained formidably rational under the worst possible pressure. He had terrorized Ganmei more than I had realized. He had kept her paralyzed for most of the time she had been imprisoned in his bed-

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room. He had stood over her, while she lay there helpless, and described all the things he could do to her. I wasn't the only person who had realized he could kick her to death. She had almost blacked out, she said, when I let him go past me.

"My entire body turned into one big fear response," Ganmei said. "You did the right thing when you ignored my instructions. I can see that now. But then—there was nothing between him and me."

Overall, I thought we had both done well. I had made some major contributions but I had let her take control when that was obviously the best thing to do. We worked like a well-coordinated team when we disposed of our prisoner, too. We both agreed we had to contact the proper authorities and obtain permission for a temporary involuntary personality modification. The authorities concurred and we administered the modification program and launched him on a forty-year voyage to the inner solar system. We would have put him on a five-year trajectory, but our governmental overseers vetoed the idea. They didn't think we should send a giant iceball careening toward civilization with a former lunatic an elevator ride from the control room.

I slipped into my secondary personality after two tendays of luxurious dinners, pleasant physical contact, and a general atmosphere of good-natured harmony. And the next time I returned to my baseline personality, I discovered I had spent twenty tendays—over half an Earth year!—pursuing my musical mania.

I had known the time was passing, of course. It just hadn't mattered to me. I had regained my normal personality because the secondary included a component that shut it down when its preoccupation reached absurd lengths.

Ganmei was working in her laboratory when I located her.

"Have we got another problem, Ganmei?"

"I couldn't help it, Joe. I just kept putting it off."

"It's been over *half an Earth year*."

"It isn't you."

"Then what is it?"

"It's what he did to me. I tried to keep my feelings under control. It wouldn't have been fair to you if I hadn't. But after you resumed your secondary, and I went back to work—"

"The last time I held you I felt like all the things that separate us had been temporarily dissolved. That was just a performance? You're telling me you kept your real emotions hidden after we got him under control?"

"*I can't help it, Joe.* I've never been through anything like that. And don't tell me we can order a therapy program. The therapies are all deconditioning procedures. You apply the procedure and remove a bad association."

"It's a standard procedure for people who've been raped and assaulted. I've even been told it can be rather pleasant—that the programs overwhelm the bad association by strengthening good associations."

"I'm not talking about an irrational association. I learned something. I learned what people are like. What they're capable of. I thought I knew."

"He was an aberration. You saw the model. He's just a silly accident. An error. He doesn't tell us anything about human nature."

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"An aberration created by the strength of the human sex drive—a drive we don't even need anymore. Deconditioning programs aren't the only way to deal with it."

I stared at her. "It would be a mistake. I've thought about doing that myself a few times. Eliminate your sexual feelings and you eliminate emotions that lie at the root of all kinds of other feelings. Warmth. Tenderness. Joie de vivre."

"And cruelty. And subjugation."

I stepped toward her and saw her stiffen in response. "You can't spend all these years alone, Ganmei. No human being can do that. You understood that when I first approached you."

"That's not what I'm talking about. You know that's not what I'm talking about."

I stretched my arms in front of me. "That's as close as I'll come to you if that's how you feel. I'll stay on the other side of the room if you want me to. But I'm not going to spend the next twelve years hiding in that artificial personality."

"And what will you be thinking while you're carefully staying out of reach? Won't you really be thinking this is just a temporary situation? And sooner or later I'll realize you aren't like him?"

I stepped back, deliberately widening the distance between us. "Do you think I came here, all this way, just so I can experience some commonplace physical sensation? I can always get that from shadows if I have to. I came here to *connect* with you, Ganmei. To make contact. In all the ways two people can touch each other. We've been throwing lifelines across the biggest gulf that ever separated a man and a woman. Bigger than wealth or class. Bigger than religion or clan loyalty or all the other barriers societies have interposed between men and women. Do you think I can't live with another gulf, too, if that's necessary?"

I meant it, too. And she knew I meant it. I was summarizing the attitude that's guided my whole life. Anyone who had spent an hour looking at the databanks would know I meant it.

They would also know, of course, that she was right and I would be waiting for the moment when I could step across that gulf and add a dab of physical contact to our relationship. Ganmei might be more intelligent than me but she was a woman, too. Her words were telling me I was confronted with a fortress but her eyes and the tone of her voice were advising me I was looking at an emotional battleground.

It took almost a year. I held her against me three hundred and forty-eight days after I had taken my vow of non-contact—and the fact that I know the exact count should tell you all you need to know about my feelings. We were talking about the wine we had just drunk when she suddenly lowered her head and took two hesitant steps in my direction. And I gathered up my nerve and took the final step for her.

But that was in the future. In the meantime, the obsolete human and the future human had to start reconstructing the relationship they had been fashioning before the aberrant human interrupted them.

We began—how else?—by playing Bach together. O

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AT TEN WOLF LAKE

William Sanders

William Sanders has been writing professionally for over a quarter of a century, though it was the nineties before he tried his hand at short fiction. His stories have since appeared in many anthologies and magazines, including this one. He got the idea for the present offbeat tale while playing with one of his collection of flight simulators.

The wind was blowing down the lake from the west, not hard but enough to raise little waves that bounced the Beaver gently as I landed and taxied over to the company dock. Miles Tulugaq was standing on the end of the dock, next to the gas pump, holding a coil of rope. I sat there in the cockpit for a minute flipping off switches and going through the rest of the shutdown routine, and then I climbed out and stood on the port float and helped Miles with the mooring lines before climbing up the wooden ladder to join him.

"Everything okay?" he said, and I nodded and passed him the clipped-together paperwork. I raised my arms over my head and stretched, feeling the usual all-my-joints-but-one stiffness after sitting in that cockpit all morning and thinking as usual how one of these days I was going to find a company that flew something with a roomier cockpit and Alaskan Bush Charters could kiss my large hairy ass. "Boy," I said, "me for a hot tub and some beer."

"Sorry, Jack," Miles said, giving me a big wide Inuit grin. "Got another job lined up, I'm afraid. Levitt says tell you to grab something to eat and then get up to the office."

I groaned to myself. I'd been looking forward to a good rest. True, it was only the middle of the day, but the morning's flight had been a dynamite haul—a dozen cases of Du Pont for a mining outfit—and flying explosives always makes me nervous and leaves me wrung out afterward.

But it was no good arguing about it. I already knew I was the only pilot available—we were running short-handed just then; Gomez was in the hos-

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pital in Anchorage after scattering pieces of a nearly new Cessna all over a bay up the coast while trying to land in a fog. I said, "Not more dynamite?"

"Nah." Miles fell in beside me and we walked back along the dock. The weathered boards felt pleasantly rough under my soles.

"People, this time," he said. "Some kind of camping party, wants to go up to Ten Wolf Lake. That's all I know."

Well, at least they wouldn't explode. On the other hand, dynamite doesn't get airsick. Or want to talk.

"How's the plane?" Miles asked. "Anything Manny needs to take a look at?"

"Everything's fine."

"Then you better go get yourself some lunch. Take your time," he said. "I've got to put the seats back in the plane, and stow their gear and top up the tanks."

He grinned at me again. "Let me know when you're ready to go meet the clients. I want to see this."

The clients were waiting in the office, standing bunched up over by the front windows looking out at the lake. There were four of them, two males and two females. They all appeared to be about the same age, definitely not young anymore but not yet what you'd call middle-aged. They all wore expensive-looking outdoor clothing, complete with waffle-stomper boots and bulky down jackets. I didn't see how they stood it; as usual Levitt had the office way too warm.

"Here he is," he said as I came in. "Your pilot, ladies and gentlemen. Captain Moss."

They were staring like a tree full of owls; a couple of them had their mouths open. Behind me I heard Miles make a muffled snorting sound.

I gave Levitt a dirty look—that "captain" business always gets on my nerves, which of course is why he does it—and said, "Just call me Jack. If you're all ready to go?"

One of the men, a pale pinch-faced character in a red baseball cap, burst into a big braying laugh. "Oh, shit," he said, shaking his head. "That's a good one."

He turned toward the desk. "But really," he said to Levitt, "when's the pilot going to be here?"

The woman standing beside him hit him on the shoulder with the back of her hand. "For God's sake, Roland," she said.

I said, "Sir," in my flattest voice, and when he looked back at me, "I assure you it's not a joke. I'm a fully qualified pilot—Mr. Levitt can show you a copy of my license if you'd like—and I'll be flying you to Ten Wolf Lake today. Unless of course you want to cancel?"

The other man was waving both hands like somebody leading a band. "No, no," he said. "That's, ah, it's—"

He sort of shook himself and took a couple of steps toward me. "Bob Harrison," he said, and stuck out his hand. "Delighted to meet you, Captain Moss. Ah, Jack."

I shook his hand and he said, "Don't mind Roland. He was just taken by surprise. As I'm afraid we all were."

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"Yeah," Roland said. "Nobody told us the pilot would be a Bigfoo—"

The woman whacked him again, harder this time, and he said, "Uh, sorry, sorry. No offense. Just slipped out, you know?"

Bob Harrison said, "I'm afraid Roland's right, all the same. We had no idea you would be, um, a Hominid American."

He gave me a quick nervous smile. He was a short stocky guy with black hair and a ragged little mustache. He looked to be a few years older than the others.

"Not that that's a problem," he added quickly. "On the contrary, it's a real privilege. An honor," he said, starting to sound a little desperate.

He looked around. "Why don't I introduce everyone?" He put his arm around the skinny blond woman who stood beside him. "My wife Kate."

Kate gave me a shy smile. "Hi."

"And," gesturing toward the loudmouth and the woman who had been hitting him, "the Bradshaws, Roland and Edith."

I stood looking at them, not saying anything, for a count of four—never hurts to make them sweat a little—and then I said, "Pleased to meet you all. Shall we get going?"

I herded them out the door and got them moving in the direction of the dock, with Miles leading the way. Going across the parking area, the woman named Edith dropped back to walk beside me. "Hello," she said.

She didn't offer her hand, which was nice, and unusual for a human; I know they do it to be friendly but we really don't like it. I mean, we live among them now and mostly we get along but having to *touch* them. . . .

This one kept her hands in the pockets of her down jacket as she said, "I want to apologize for my husband. He's not really a bigot. Just an asshole with a big mouth."

I couldn't argue with that. I looked down at her with a bit more interest. She was short and built small, with dark hair cut short in back and shiny, alert-looking brown eyes. I think a human male would have considered her pretty, but what do I know?

She said, "You have to remember, none of us has ever even met a Hominid American before. I don't believe there are any in Philadelphia."

"Probably not. We're not much on cities."

"Still," she said, "he knew better than to say—what he said."

I stopped and looked down at my feet. "Size fourteen," I said. "That's pretty big, I guess. By your standards."

She laughed. "Yes, but that's no excuse for saying so."

We started walking again, catching up with the others. I said, "Well, it's not the worst thing we've been called. But it's true we don't much care for it."

"What do you call yourselves, then?"

I told her. "Oh, dear," she said. "I don't think I could pronounce that."

"No. Your throat muscles can't make some of our sounds. But," I said, "you don't have to bother with that fancy Hominid American business either. When we're speaking English we mostly say homin or just hom."

She didn't ask any more questions, but all the way to the dock I could feel her taking quick little looks at me. I could guess why; she was proba-

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bly thinking I wasn't really all that big. At six feet three and a bit over three hundred pounds, I'm fairly typical for an adult male homin, and you can see humans that big or bigger on any decent pro football team.

And even though we've been out of the woods, as you might say, for a good many years now, most humans are still under the influence of those old stories, which made us out to be gigantic. They forget that the original reports mostly came from relatively short people—such as Miles's ancestors—and that footprints in snow or mud always erode out bigger than the feet that made them. And then too the fur probably makes us look bigger.

As for that overpowering stench we were supposed to have, Mama always said the humans were just smelling what they'd done when they saw us.

Out at the end of the dock I stood and waited while Miles helped the clients down the ladder and into the plane. I noticed Edith clutched at him pretty solidly, even though she didn't look the nervous type. Well, my nose had been picking up frustrated-female pheromones ever since I got near her. Maybe Roland's mouth was the only big thing he had.

When they were all on board I climbed down onto the float and cast off the mooring lines for Miles to haul in. I hoisted myself up into the cockpit and shut the door. Bob Harrison had taken the seat beside me, and I hadn't heard any argument about it; it was plain to see he was the leader of this little pack. "Well," he said, "off we go, eh?"

I buckled myself in and began the startup routine: select center tank, prop pitch lever all the way back, carb heat to cold, generator switch on.

"Where'd you learn to fly?" Bob Harrison asked. "In the armed forces?"

Mixture to three-quarters rich. "Federal minority job training program," I said. "We don't do military service." Open throttle about a quarter.

"Oh, yes," he said, "I heard that somewhere. You're nonviolent, then?"

I choked back a hoot; this one had obviously never been in a barroom full of hom construction workers on Saturday night. "No," I said, "just the uniform requirements. Same reason there are almost no hominid cops." I took my right foot off the rudder pedal and wiggled my toes at him. "We don't wear shoes."

Or even clothes if we can help it, I started to add but didn't. One reason I hate to fly human passengers is that I have to keep those damn company coveralls on the whole time. I was already starting to itch all over.

He said, "I see. So then—"

"Look," I said, "please don't be offended, but I need to concentrate just now, all right?"

I flipped the main battery switch and the instrument panel came alive. I reached down and turned on the boost pump and waited till the fuel pressure needle swung past five psi. The engine hadn't had time to cool down completely after the morning's flight but I gave the primer a couple of strokes anyway. Left and right magneto switches on.

I thumbed the starter switch up and held it while the old Pratt & Whitney turned over, groaning with reluctance at first. The prop blades whipped by in front of the battered red cowling, faster and faster, and then there was a cough and a rumble as the engine caught and I let go of

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the starter switch and eased the throttle back a little. As soon as the oil pressure gauge registered 50 psi I shoved the prop pitch lever all the way forward and switched off the boost pump.

"Everybody buckled up?" I said, and heard a series of hasty clicks behind and beside me because, of course, they hadn't.

With a landplane this would have been the time to check the magnetos and a couple of other things, but obviously a floatplane doesn't have brakes so any time you run the engine up you're going to go somewhere, and right now there wasn't enough water in front of the Beaver for anything like that. So I pushed the mixture lever to full rich and gave her a little gas and jockeyed her away from the dock and got her turned around into the wind, using the little rudders on the floats, and then I ran the P&W up to 1750 and did the mag check. The drop was shop-manual perfect, which was no surprise at all in an engine Manny had worked on. I cycled the prop pitch through full range and had a quick look over the instruments. Nothing was waving its arms at me. I said, "Here we go, then."

Flaps down to takeoff position. Quick silent prayer to the ancestors, then throttle to the wall. The old Beaver blared and bellowed and charged forward across the lake, the trees along the shoreline blurring as she picked up speed. I felt the little surge as the floats broke surface tension and began to plane. At 35 knots I hit the switch to retract the water rudders; there was enough pressure on the control surfaces now to hold her straight with the pedals. I watched the airspeed indicator and when it hit 65 I gave the stick a bit of back pressure to break her loose and then the wings took the weight and the Beaver quit being an overpowered motorboat and began to do what she was meant to do.

In the back seat Roland said, "Buddy, I apologize again. You are, no shit, a pilot and a hell of a slick one too."

I should have made some reply, I guess, but I was busy setting the flaps to climb and adjusting the trim for a climb rate of 500 feet per minute. I wouldn't have known what to say anyway. I'm just no good at talking with the higher products of evolution.

The day stayed clear and sunny so everybody had a fine view of the scenery on the way up to Ten Wolf Lake. It was the last week in May and everything was nice and green, though there were still some patches of snow up under the trees. They'd picked a pretty good time for their camping trip or whatever they were up to; another month and the weather would be warmer, but then the blackfly season would have started too.

About halfway there Bob Harrison said suddenly, "Ten Wolf Lake. Do you know how it got the name?"

I shook my head. "I'm sure there's a story, but I've never heard it. But then I'm not originally from this part of Alaska."

"Are there wolves around there, then?" Kate asked. She sounded a little nervous.

"Oh, sure." The Alaskan bush and she wants to know if there are wolves? What did she expect, hamsters? "Quite a few," I said. "You might see some while you're there. Don't worry, though, they don't go in for attacking people. They're really pretty shy."

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Her husband said, "What do you people call the place? I mean, what's its Sasquatch name?"

I shrugged. "Beats me. I don't speak a word of Sasquatch."

He was looking confused again. I said, "Sasquatches live way down south of here, in the Cascades. Not in Alaska." Actually there probably are a few, the way everybody gets around nowadays—we get a good many Siberian Kaptars coming over looking for work, and I even know where there's an Australian Yowie tending bar in Sitka—but I've never met any.

Kate said, "So you're—?"

"Arulataq. That's the main tribe around these parts. With a good many Toonijuq, though they're mostly over in Canada."

"I'll be damned," Bob said. "And you can't understand each other's languages?"

I looked at him. "How's your Arabic?"

He thought that over. "All right," he said, "point taken."

"I speak Arulataq," I said, "and English and a little Russian, and a few odds and ends of Inuit and Tlingit. That's it."

In fact that wasn't quite true. My ex-wife was Windigo, and I picked up quite a bit of that before she got pissed off at me and went back to Quebec. Especially toward the end there, when I learned a good many new words, of a kind I hadn't even known she knew. But it wasn't something I wanted to talk about.

Ten Wolf Lake was surrounded by wooded mountains that broke the wind, so the water was flat and calm as I brought the Beaver in. It looked the same as the last time I'd been there; the cabin was still standing—something you can't always count on, with parties of hunters and fishermen getting drunk and setting fires—and the roof appeared to be reasonably intact. There was no dock but there was a spot in close to shore where the water was deep enough for the Beaver, and a little while later the clients were standing on the bank under the trees, surrounded by their piled-up possessions. At least they hadn't brought as much junk as most city campers.

Bob Harrison said, "I don't know if Mr. Levitt told you, but there's another couple coming to join us. They should be arriving in a few days."

The others were looking around them, at the cabin and the lake and the woods. The scent of excitement was very strong, along with a little bit of what might be fear. There was something else, too, something I couldn't identify, but it's always hard to be sure with humans.

I said, "You want me to come back and check on you, say in a week? Bring you any supplies?"

"No need." He pulled out a cell phone and held it up. "We'll just call if we need anything."

They all lined up and waved as I fired up the P&W again and ran the Beaver down to the far end of the lake and got her turned around. I didn't really need that much run—unloaded, a Beaver takes off like a buggered bat—but I wanted to make sure they couldn't see me as I peeled off those coveralls. It was a clumsy business getting them off in that little cockpit, but it was worth it. I opened the side window a little so the wind could ruffle through my fur as I took off.

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It was getting pretty late in the day when I set the Beaver down again. I struggled back into the coveralls—you never knew who might be around, even out here in the boondocks—and taxied back up to the dock, where Miles was waiting. This time I saw he had Manny with him.

"So he returns," Manny said as I came up the ladder. "Hallo, tall, dark, and unsightly." It came out more like *und oonzitely*; five years in this country hadn't been nearly enough to shake Manny's Black Forest accent.

I said, "Mannfried, my vertically challenged bro. Stand on Miles so I can see you better."

We laughed and Manny reached up so we could slap hands. Miles said, "You two. I swear."

I looked down at Manny, wondering as always how someone only three feet tall could be related to me. But the scientists say it's definite; the DNA evidence proves Kobolds are hominids, and not even a separate species.

I never knew why Manny wound up in Alaska, but I was glad he had, because he was one hell of a mechanic. He could crawl right into the tightest parts of the plane, too.

Right now, though, I was just as happy he hadn't been around to meet bigmouth Roland. The last fool to call Manny a dwarf was now known around Fairbanks as One-Ear Willie.

I left them to finish putting the Beaver to bed for the night, and walked on up the dock and across the lot. The office was closed up and Levitt's car was gone so he must have shut down early today. That was fine with me. I got out my keys and got into my pickup truck. A couple of minutes later I was heading down the gravel road toward town.

I'd meant to go straight home, but about halfway there I got to feeling really hungry—I hadn't had much of a lunch, after all. Then I saw the little roadhouse off to the right of the road amid a grove of trees, and I pulled in and stopped without having to think about it.

I parked the truck and got out and stood for a minute looking the place over. The ancestors knew how many times I must have driven past it in the couple of years I'd been working for Alaskan Bush Charters, yet I'd never stopped and never really paid it any attention. It wasn't much to look at; just a small log building and a big sign with the magic words HOT FOOD—COLD BEER. I didn't see any other vehicles in the lot. Maybe they were closed.

But I went up and tried the front door, and it opened, so I went inside. There were maybe half a dozen tables and a small bar or counter. I went over to the bar and started to sit down on one of the high stools and then a loud raspy voice said, "Hey! Hey, ape-shape! What do you think you're doing?"

A skinny, bald-headed man came around the end of the counter, looking seriously angry. "I guess you can't read?" he said, pointing.

I looked up and saw a big hand-lettered sign:

NO MONKYS
NO INDIANS
DOGS WELCOME

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"Go on, God damn it." He came closer, making shooing motions with his hands. "Get out of here."

I didn't move; I was too surprised, really, to do or say anything.

He leaned on the counter and stared at me. "Listen here," he said in a lower, very intense voice. "The United States Supreme Court says you're people. Says you can vote and go to school and everything. I can't do anything about that, the white man's already lost control of this country anyway. But they say I got to serve a bunch of damn dirty apes in my own place of binness, and I'm not taking that kind of shit laying down."

He reached under the counter suddenly and came up with a gun. It was a huge shiny revolver, some kind of Magnum I thought. The kind people in the back country carried to stop bears.

"And don't even *think,*" he said, pointing it at me, "about starting anything. I'll kill you before you can get within reach."

He'd do it, too; I could smell the hate and the fear coming off him so strong I could barely breathe. I got up slowly, keeping my hands in sight, and backed toward the door. "Go on," he yelled after me. "Run to the law if you want. I don't give a damn."

Out in the truck I sat for a couple of minutes, shaking from the reaction. I hadn't run into anything like this in years; I'd forgotten what it felt like.

Not that there weren't plenty of places that managed to avoid serving homs, or tried to; but usually they ran cute little tricks like the "no shoes, no service" gag, or claimed their tables were all booked up or something. They didn't just come out and say it in your face like this.

I'd thought that was all behind us, or nearly so. You still heard stories—Alaska always has gotten more than its share of diehards and crazies—but the incidents were getting increasingly rare. And they weren't quite real, because they always involved people you didn't know, in places you'd never been.

Now here was one practically in my back yard. He couldn't have been here very long, or I'd have heard about him. Must have just recently taken over the diner.

I wanted badly to go back in and take it, and him, apart; but then I'd wind up in trouble with the law, and Levitt would fire me and my life would generally go to hell and it wasn't worth it. Besides, the old shithead might shoot me—and he'd get away with it, too; he'd swear I attacked him and he had to fire in self-defense, and it would be his word against a dead hom's.

So I started the truck and drove on to town, making a note to pass the word to some people I knew in Hominid Rights Watch. They'd make a lot more trouble for him than I could. There was some satisfaction in the thought.

But just before reaching town I stopped the truck again on a deserted stretch of road and got out and ran over to the edge of the woods and stood for a long time pounding both fists against a big tree, till the pain finally made me stop; and then I got back in the truck and drove on home with the blood and bits of bark still sticking to the fur of my arms.

* * *

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Next Thursday morning when I came to work Levitt was standing in the office doorway. "Jack," he called as I got out of the truck. "More passengers for you."

One look at the couple waiting in the office and I knew they had to be the ones Bob Harrison had told me about. They were about the same age group as the others, and they had that same look; I don't know how to describe it. The man was tall and bony, with nearly as much hair on his face as mine. The woman was squat and dark and working on a pretty decent mustache of her own.

They didn't act at all surprised to see me. I remembered Bob Harrison with his cell phone.

"Jerry and Doris King," the man said, shaking my hand. "We were supposed to come with Bob and the others, but we had a little family emergency at the last minute."

"That's okay," Levitt said from behind the desk. He peered at me over the tops of his thick Elvis Costello glasses. "Jack will be glad of the chance to see your friends again. He really hit it off with them."

I said a couple of rude words in Arulataq and Levitt snickered and said, "Well, you'd better get going. You've still got that load of drill bits to haul when you get back."

The Kings weren't as talkative as the others. On the way up to Ten Wolf Lake he asked me a couple of questions about the weather, nothing more. She just sat in back and didn't speak at all until we were almost there.

But as I flew over the lake and started to bring the plane around she said suddenly, "Jerry, look!"

I glanced back but I couldn't see where she was pointing. Jerry was looking out his window and nodding, and I tried to see past him but he was blocking my view. Then he moved his head and I could see just a little bit. Just enough to catch a very brief glimpse of a couple of fast-moving shapes, indistinct as shadows, streaking along the edge of the cabin clearing and vanishing into the woods. They were gone so fast I might have wondered if I'd really seen anything at all, if I hadn't been too busy flying an airplane to give it any thought.

I got the Beaver turned into the wind and set her down on the lake, which was a bit bumpier than last time but still easy water. There was nobody in sight, and that surprised me; I'd expected they'd all come running when they heard the plane. Maybe, I thought, they'd gone hiking or something.

But then the cabin door opened and Bob Harrison came out. He waved as I nudged the Beaver up to the shore, and by the time I got the engine shut down and the doors open he was striding across the clearing toward us, buttoning his shirt awkwardly and stuffing it into his pants as he came.

Something moved back at the cabin and I saw Kate standing in the doorway, doing hasty things to her clothes. So we'd interrupted a little something? I laughed to myself and climbed out onto the port float to help the passengers disembark.

They went straight to Bob Harrison, with a little flurry of smiles and handshakes. Doris turned and started trotting across the clearing to meet

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Kate, who was on her way down from the cabin now. I got busy with a mooring line, tying the Beaver up to a handy stump. "Bob," I heard Jerry say. "You're looking good. Everybody all right? Where are Roland and Edith?"

"They went for a run," Bob said, and I paused, surprised; those two definitely hadn't struck me as the athletic type. Maybe the fresh air and the outdoor life had charged their batteries somehow.

It certainly seemed to have worked on Bob; as Jerry said, he was looking good. He stood straighter, he didn't wave his hands nervously when he talked, and his face looked firmer and more confident; his mustache even looked fuller and not so silly. When he came toward me there was a smooth spring in his step that hadn't been there before. "Jack," he said. "Good to see you again."

I managed to have my hands full of the Kings' gear in time to get out of the handshake routine, so instead he gave me a hand with the unloading. Doris and Kate were coming down to join us now; Kate ran ahead and gave Jerry a big hug. Now I noticed, she was looking good too. In fact I couldn't remember seeing a human woman move like that, except maybe in the Olympics on TV. Maybe there was something in the water here.

They smelled different, too. Or Bob did, anyway; I didn't get close enough to Kate to be sure. The sour nervous scent was gone, and the other one, the strange one, was much stronger than before. I still couldn't identify it, though something in the back of my head was trying to make a connection.

When everything was unloaded Bob said, "All right, I guess we'd better get you moved in," and then to me, "Have a safe flight back," and they all started picking things up and heading toward the cabin. Doris King gave me a look—I think she'd been expecting me to carry her stuff for her; dream on, lady—but then she hoisted her duffel bag and moved off after the others.

I waited till they had disappeared into the cabin and then I went over to the edge of the woods to take care of some pressing personal business. I hosed down a big cedar and reached for the coveralls' clumsy zip, and then I saw something lying on the ground, almost hidden by the underbrush.

It was part of the front leg of a half-grown deer. The hoof was still attached and intact, but the rest of it was mostly exposed bone with a few scraps of ragged, bloody skin. I didn't even have to bend down to see the tooth marks.

"There's something weird," I told Manny after I got back, "about that bunch up at Ten Wolf Lake."

"Hah." Manny snorted. "They're *all* weird, my large friend. Haven't you learned that yet?"

That was something I envied Manny; he wasn't the least bit intimidated or put off by humans. His people, after all, had been interacting with them for hundreds of years, while we were hiding in the woods. He told me once, with a perfectly straight face, that Himmler had tried to recruit a Kobold SS unit toward the end of the war. "As if we'd fight," he said, "for

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that bunch of losers who couldn't even get a swastika the right way round."

It wasn't quite noon yet, but I decided to go ahead and eat and then get on with the next job. I went out to get my lunch out of the truck and that was when I saw the blue pickup parked next to mine. There was a sticker on the back bumper with a drawing of a big hairy fist and the words FIRST BEINGS POWER. I sighed and went around to the driver's side and said, "Charley."

Charley Rockslide rolled down his window. He looked a little angry, but then he usually did. "Moss," he said in Arulataq. "And don't call me that skinface name. Just Rockslide, okay?"

"So what brings you here?" I said, and then I noticed the human sitting next to him. "Hello," I said in English.

The man grunted and raised a hand. He was pretty young, with long black hair; Indian, I was pretty sure, definitely not white and the wrong facial shape for Inuit.

"Jimmy Raven," Charley said. "Jimmy, my cousin Moss." That wasn't exactly right, but close enough; there aren't any words in English for some of the homin relationships.

"Speaking of skinfaces," I said in Arulataq, "what are you doing riding around with one? Considering the things I've heard you say about them?"

I knew the answer; I was just jerking his chain. Charley belonged to a radical hominid-power organization that went in for loud speeches and marches and demonstrations and anything else they could do to get on TV. There weren't very many of them, but they managed to get a lot of attention all the same. Most of the older homs regarded them as a bunch of noisy assholes. Not that there wasn't a lot of truth in the things they said; it was just that they *were*.

And at first they'd been down on humans in general, calling them "slugs" and saying we should have wiped them out back before the Ice Age and so on; but lately they'd been getting tight with a local Indian-militant fringe group calling themselves War Party. Which was almost certainly where this one came in.

I said in English, "Pleased to meet you," and Jimmy Raven grunted again; he sure wasn't the talkative type. Or maybe Charley had been telling him things about me.

Charley said, "We'd like to engage your professional services."

He said it in English, not that there was any doubt who "we" included. I looked at him for a couple of seconds before deciding he was serious. "Charley," I said, "what are you up to?" Not that there was any doubt about that either. At least in general terms.

"We need some flying done," Charley said. "That's simple, isn't it? And you're one of us—"

"The hell I am."

"I mean you're a First Being." Charley and his gang wouldn't say "hominid"; they said it meant we were second-rate humans when in fact it was the skinfaces who were the degenerate branch of the family. They didn't say that last part any more, since they hooked up with War Party, but they still wouldn't use the word.

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I said, "Number one, I doubt if you've got the money. You're not talking about calling a taxicab, you know."

"We've got the money," Jimmy Raven said, speaking up for the first time. "Don't worry about that."

They probably did at that. I knew how they got it, too. So did every hom in Alaska and half the humans. Even if nobody had been able to catch them at it yet.

"Then," I said, "you're talking to the wrong guy. Go in the office there and see Levitt. He's the one who books the flights."

Charley shifted himself around a little and rubbed his face. "Well," he said, still speaking English, "see, we'd really rather not do that." He lowered his voice, though there was nobody else nearby or even in sight. "We had in mind something kind of off the record, you know?"

"Charley," I said, "the plane doesn't belong to me. I can't just borrow it for personal purposes. Even if I wanted to."

Jimmy Raven said, "Okay, what if we chartered it to go somewhere and then you went somewhere else instead?"

"Oh, sure. And then burn my license and take a job on a pipeline crew. You have any idea what they do to pilots who file bogus flight plans? They're really tough on that sort of thing nowadays, with all the terrorist stuff going on. You wouldn't believe the controls they've got."

"Everybody has to take risks and make sacrifices," Charley said, "in the cause of social justice."

He'd started talking like that about a year ago, after he went to that big international hominid conference in Seattle and got to hanging out with a bunch of Maoist yetis from Nepal. Before that he was just your basic loudmouthed punk.

"Oh, moose shit. Save that for the TV interviews, okay? Social justice my ass," I said. "You've got a shipment of dope you want brought in. Either that or some of those guns you fools are buying with the dope money."

I ran my hand over the shiny fender of the pickup truck. "Well, some of the money, anyway. You didn't buy this with your unemployment checks."

Charley's face was even uglier than usual. Shave him and he'd be a dead ringer for that old man at the roadhouse.

He said, "I should have known." He was speaking Arulataq again. "I should have known better than to ask you to do anything for your own kind. Too busy snuggling up to the skinfaces—"

"Like your friend here? Or those white college kids you sell that Sasquatch grass to?" I stepped back from the truck. "I think you're leaving now."

He opened his mouth and I said, "In fact I think you left about fifteen minutes ago. Didn't you?"

It was easy to see he wanted to take this farther—the fight smell was coming off him in a regular cloud—but I knew he wasn't going to try. I had the size and the reach on him and I've got, let's say, a certain reputation.

Jimmy Raven, I noticed, was sitting very still and quiet and keeping his hands on his knees. Smart Indian.

Charley said a really bad word in Arulataq and started the pickup and

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jammed it into reverse and backed out, and then he swung it around and tore out of the parking lot in a shower of gravel and the clash of a clumsy gear change. I watched till he was gone and then I unlocked my own truck and got my lunch bag and took it down to the dock.

Miles was there, loading the drilling bits into the Beaver. "Heard some commotion," he said. "What's happening?"

I sat down on a piling. "Just some crazy stuff," I said. "I swear everybody's gone crazy. Feel like I'm in one of those late-night horror movies."

He laughed and went back to what he was doing, and I opened the bag and reached in; and then all of a sudden I thought of something, and I started laughing and laughing, till Miles must have thought I'd lost my damn mind.

About a week later I came back from a flight to Kenai and found Levitt waiting on the dock. "Got another flight up to Ten Wolf Lake," he said. "They phoned in a big list of supplies they wanted. Miles is in town getting it now."

I followed him back to the office and handed him the paperwork from the morning's delivery. While he was filing it I went over and had a look at the large calendar on the wall by his desk.

"What are you doing?" he said, blinking at me.

"Nothing," I said. "Just checking something."

The Harrisons were standing on the shore of the lake as I came in. I didn't see any of the others.

It didn't take long to unload the supplies they'd ordered—there was quite a lot of it, but Miles had packed it with his usual efficiency—and after the last box was ashore I said, "Looks as if you're planning to be here awhile."

"Yes," Bob said. "Actually we don't know quite how long. There have been . . . some changes in our plans."

He was looking *really* good. They both were. Kate looked ten years younger.

He said, "Well. Thank you."

I said, "I almost told Levitt to get somebody else. But then I checked the calendar."

"Calendar?" He looked baffled. "I don't—"

"Quarter moon," I said. "I guessed I'd be safe."

They looked at each other and then at me and then at each other again and then Kate started laughing, very high in her throat. She put her hands up to her cheeks. "Oh, my God," she said in a whisper.

Bob said, "You know?"

"I figured it out."

He started laughing too, then, or rather chuckling in a kind of growly way. "Well," he said, "what the hell."

He turned and cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, "All right, everybody! Come on out! He knows!"

There was a long pause. The only sound was the soft lapping of the waves against the Beaver's floats.

Then they started coming out of the woods, first Jerry and Doris

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King—both of them completely naked; at the time I barely noticed—and then the wolves, coming from all directions, more wolves than I'd ever seen in one place, stepping silently out of the shadows beneath the trees and stopping at the edge of the clearing, all of them staring straight in my direction.

I felt the hair rising all down my back. Not that I was surprised—I'd known they were there, been smelling them ever since I landed. But knowing wasn't the same as seeing; million-year-old voices in my head were screaming at me to run like hell.

A moment later Edith Bradshaw appeared, walking slowly along beside an enormous gray wolf. She didn't have any clothes on either. Her left hand rested on the wolf's back, just behind his shoulders. She was smiling.

"You know," Bob said, "it's really good that you're the first one to know. It's so appropriate."

Kate nodded. "You see, you inspired us. Your example."

I tried to say, "What?" but it came out as a shapeless dry-throat croak.

"We talked about it, after you'd gone," Bob said, "how you and your people had given up your long secrecy and taken your place in the so-called civilized world. How you had defied prejudice and demanded respect and dignity. Watching you fly that airplane, thinking of all that represented—well, as Kate says, it was an inspiration to us."

"So," Kate said, "we talked about it, and we made the decision. We're going to come out too."

"Uh," I managed to say. "You—?"

"Not just this group, of course," Bob said. "We'll have to go back, carry the message to others like us, so we can come out as a people. It's going to take time and organization and hard work. Which is why we're staying here a bit longer than we'd intended. We've got a lot of planning and discussing to do."

"And this is the perfect place for it," Edith said, coming up next to the Harrisons. The wolf sat down on his haunches beside her and she stroked his head. I realized suddenly that the unsatisfied-female scent was gone. In its place was one I remembered from a couple of years ago, before my marriage went to hell.

For no good reason I said, "Where's Roland?"

Edith tilted her head in the direction of a skinny, slightly mangy-looking wolf trotting across the clearing toward us. "He had a late night," she said.

"By the way," Bob said, "that full-moon business—it's just a legend. No idea how it got started."

Jerry King said, "We'd really appreciate it if you wouldn't say anything about this just yet."

Oh, well, actually I'm going to hold a press conference when I get back. . . . I said, "I wouldn't dream of it."

"So," Miles said as he tied the mooring lines, "how's everybody up at Ten Wolf Lake?"

"Miles," I said, "I think the minority situation around here just got even more complicated." ○

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LANGUAGE BARRIER

Matthew Jarpe

Matthew Jarpe has had such diverse jobs as biology undergrad student, biochemistry grad student, biochemistry post-doc, and biochemist. He now works, as a biochemist, for a biotechnology company called Biogen.

The bogie had gone Newton Three. Dane knew that as soon as she woke up. There was no other reason the comm panel beside her bed would have interrupted her sleep. There was no emergency that the night shift could not handle. Nothing that important ever happened on SoPo2. Until now, because now their bogie had gone Newton Three.

Dane got out of bed and dressed. She didn't bother looking at the clock. What difference did it make? She was up, she was on her way to the control room. It was finally happening.

Newton One was no big deal. The Solar Polar Observatories found them all the time, just another piece of junk coasting in from the Oort. Newton Two was a little more interesting. Anything that changed vectors unexpectedly was worth watching carefully.

But Newton Three was another matter. No unknown object had ever wandered in from interstellar space and fired a reaction drive engine to change course, in Dane's entire tour as head of SoPo2. Hell, there had never been a Newton Three in the history of the SoPo Observer program. For that matter there had never been one in the history of the human race, at least not documented.

Dane walked into the control room and Torrenze, the night shift commander, stood up. "M. Zaniff," he said, "your watch."

Dane took the seat he had vacated. "I take it they burned?"

"Fusion torch," Torrenze answered.

"Nobody burns a fusion torch without asking us first," Dane said. "If it isn't extrasolar visitors, I'm going to have their heads." Fusion drives were dangerous, and they disrupted communications over long distances. The Coordinator Group could revoke operators' licenses and recommend jail time for the uncoordinated use of such an engine.

"And if they are extrasolars they might not have any heads," Opey Kalnikov said as he took over the Interface chair from his night shift counterpart. He made himself comfortable in the hot seat in the middle of the

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horseshoe. He was surrounded by controls, for the external sensor array, the display screens, and the massive artificial intelligence that ran the whole thing. He didn't need any of those controls. He unlatched a door under the horseshoe, pulled out a cable, and jabbed the connector into the side of his head. He wasn't in control of the computer now, he *was* the computer.

"Let's operate under the assumption that it's a stupid and careless human," Dane told him. "Show me the data."

The AI that was connected to Opey knew what she wanted, but only because the message went through Opey. He was the only person on SoPo2 who could directly interface with one of the three AI's, and he made the machines more effective by orders of magnitude. In seconds, the display showed exactly what Dane needed.

The bogie was a yellow triangle on a black surface. Known objects were indicated with white dots and tiny identifiers. She could magnify the labels with a touch on the pad of her armrest. Gravity was indicated by a network of faint blue lines, like the lines on a topo map. Most of them sloped toward the Sun, but a few were distorted by the white dots.

Suddenly, the yellow triangle was boxed in flashing red. Data scrolled off from the right side of the box to the bottom of the display. Dane slowed the replay and read through the data carefully. Most of it she didn't understand. But she could see the emission spectrum and the filtered absorption lines clearly enough. She knew what they meant. The bogie had lit a fusion drive aimed at the Sun. It was slowing down.

"So, we've got company then, do we?" Seymour Gladstone stood in the doorway and smiled. "It's about time. I was beginning to think we were sent out here as some sort of elaborate joke." He slouched into the Ombudsman's seat to Dane's left. "Have they tried to talk to us yet?"

"They just burned a few minutes ago," Torrenze said.

"You mean six and a half hours ago," Seymour said. Dane shot him a look out of the corner of her eye, but said nothing.

"That's right," Torrenze answered. "As you know, there is a significant delay. . . ."

Dane stopped him with a gesture, her finger describing a circle in the air in front of her. Move along, skip ahead. Dane hated any sentence that started with "As you know."

"It's still outside the orbit of Neptune, about twenty degrees off the ecliptic," Torrenze stumbled on. "It's moving at a few thousand klicks per second. The burn is pretty hard, sixty g's."

"Lucy," Dane said, "anything human-made ever do sixty g's?"

"Not with people inside," Lucy Totek answered her from the Traffic station. "At least I wouldn't want to clean out the ship after they're done."

"Then it's either automated, advanced tech, or extrasolar, in that order," Dane said. "We could send them a stern warning about that fusion torch."

Seymour waved his hands. "It wouldn't do any good. If it's a machine, it's obviously not programmed to obey the law. If it's people they either know about the Coordinator Group and are choosing to thumb their noses at us, or they don't know and they probably won't listen. And if they are extrasolars, a stern warning might put them off. Assuming they savvy our lingo, that is."

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Dane nodded. "Good point. Let's treat them as extrasolars for the time being. Can't hurt. Opey, send them the Math Quiz." The Math Quiz was a series of beeps that made it clear that the sender was intelligent, and it prompted for a reply that proved the same thing about the recipient. It was broadcast on several frequencies.

"What do you figure they're aiming for?" Seymour asked.

Torrenze shrugged. "With their current vector, they won't come anywhere near a planet until they enter the inner system. The biggest thing they're going to run into in the next few months is a Trans-Neptunian Object about three billion klicks from Uranus, the closest planet."

"What the hell do they want to go there for?" Seymour asked. "Why waste all that fuel for a TNO? They come all this way just to watch ice not melt? It doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't make sense because we don't have any data," Dane said. "Anything special about this TNO?"

"It's inhabited," Lucy said. "Registration is a little vague. All we have is a name. The colony calls itself Wernicke's Children."

"Homesteaders?" Dane asked with a wince.

"It looks like it," Lucy answered. "They've got no supply service, no communication other than the transponder signal for the last twelve years. One spacecraft has visited since it was founded, and that was nine years ago. We have no idea if anyone is still alive there. The records should be at Solar Prime. The trajectory makes it clear why they stopped there, though. It's the first object with a radio signal they ran into on their way into the system."

"Did it have to be homesteaders?" Dane asked under her breath.

It took longer than it should have to get the information back from Solar Prime. There was over an hour time lag each way, but it was almost noon before the response to Dane's query came back. Seymour was the main communication link with the Coordinator Group headquarters in orbit around Mercury. At Dane's insistence he sent three follow-up messages to his various contacts in the organization before they got the registration documents for the Wernicke's Children colony.

"Finally," he said, pulling the text message up on his screen. "Would you believe they had to dig this out by hand? Someone on Earth actually physically stuck his hand in a file drawer and pulled out paper to get this data. It had better be good."

"If they're homesteaders, it's bound to be interesting," Dane said. You had to be at least a little bit crazy to set up camp on a frozen ball at the far edge of the solar system. And most of the homesteaders were not a little bit crazy at all, not by a long shot. Industrial strength crazy was more like it.

"Here we go. Wernicke's Children is a colony set up for people suffering from a mental disorder called Wernicke's aphasia. Hell, that's relatively normal. No indication here what that disorder is. I'll just consult the database." He began to stab at his keyboard in his distracted and unfocused manner.

"Can we have that data sometime today, Seymour?"

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"Relax, Dane. The aliens aren't going anywhere. Ah, here we go. Wernicke's aphasia is a disruption of a specific region of the brain by stroke or trauma. Messes with language processing so you can't talk. It's also called sensory aphasia to distinguish it from motor aphasia. Patients can speak, but they usually spout gibberish, and they often don't understand the spoken word."

"Any other symptoms? Are these people a danger to themselves or others?"

"Not from what I'm reading," Seymour said. "Looks like it's usually a very discrete lesion that causes this disorder. You lose a bigger piece of your brain and they don't call it Wernicke's aphasia, they call it something else. Massive brain damage."

"Well, this certainly wouldn't be my choice for a first contact," Dane said. "On the other hand, maybe it isn't so bad. The staff that takes care of these people might have some special insights about language."

Seymour grimaced. "It's a stretch. Do you want me to call them up and find out what their capabilities are?"

"Be discreet," Dane said. "Anyone could be listening, and we don't want to get the other homesteaders excited. Bad enough they should run into one bunch of crazies, without having the whole zoo descend on them. In the meantime, we're coming up on our earliest window to get a reply to the Math Quiz. Opey, are all channels open?"

Opey spoke with his human voice and the control room speakers at the same time. It was a creepy effect, but it served a purpose. When you heard that, you knew you were getting an AI/human mind interface working on your request. "We're bringing in all wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation," he said. "Maximum computing power is on line to analyze any communications. Earliest response time in three minutes."

The bogie was just beyond the orbit of Neptune. It took five hours and forty minutes for the Math Quiz to get there, and it would have taken the same amount of time for the earliest reply to get back. Dane watched the clock while her right foot tapped against the floor.

"I'm getting something," Opey said. "Radio broadcast, the same range of frequencies as the message we sent."

"A response to the Quiz?" Dane asked.

"It is not an answer to the Quiz," Opey said. "It looks random."

"So they can't do the math," Seymour said. "Hell, I'm not sure I could do that Quiz myself. I should give it a try someday."

"I'm analyzing the data," Opey said, and he drifted off. The three AI's on SoPo2 were using all of his human intuition to augment their own number crunching abilities. He was still in the zone three hours later.

"Opey, I'm going to have to ask you to come up for air," Dane said. "You need a break."

"I'm okay," Opey said, but he said it in his own voice, without the speakers. The AI's had let him go.

"Are you getting anywhere?"

"I've gathered in over three hours of pulses, but I can't see any pattern. No repetition, no evident syntax. The information content still reads as zero. It's noise."

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"Well, let's just keep gathering data, and send out some more simple messages of our own. We'll figure out what they're saying sooner or later."

"Options," Dane said when the last of her staff had taken their seats in the conference room. The messages from the bogie remained untranslatable three days later, while the message they had sent to the Wernicke's colony had met with dead silence. The people of the colony, if any remained alive, were either unable or unwilling to respond.

"Standard procedure," Seymour said. "We need an agent on site. We can't do our business right with this time lag."

Dane frowned. She hated being reminded about the time lag, but Seymour was right. "Lucy, who's closest to that TNO? What can we commandeer?"

"We can commandeer any spacecraft in the solar system," Lucy said. The Coordinators didn't rule by physical force or force of public opinion, but they had a long reach all the same. "But only two ships are in a position to reach the colony in less than sixty days: a long range hauler called *Rattle and Hum* and *Farchild III*."

"*Farchild?*"

"Just a short elevator ride from this very conference room," Seymour said. "How convenient."

"That can't be right," Dane said. "We're almost six light hours away. There has to be something closer."

"Outer system is a big place," Lucy said. "It doesn't take much orbital separation to put serious distance between things. We've got momentum because we're orbiting in the right direction, and we have the fuel."

"Fuel isn't the issue," Dane said. "I can requisition all the fuel we need like that." She snapped her fingers.

"You can buy all the fuel you want, sure," Lucy said, "but you can't get it where you need it. It's faster to just send someone from here. *Farchild* can make the trip in about three months. That's a few weeks after the bogie gets there. *Rattle and Hum* is a cargo hauler schlepping a load of biomass out to some other gang of homesteaders on spec, hoping to trade for some volatiles, I guess. It's a single man, and it can't be a very smart one with that business plan. He can get there in sixty-three days."

"Could *Farchild* make it back?" Dane asked.

"No, it'd use all its fuel getting there. We'd have to send someone out to fuel it up. Or maybe these Wernicke's people have some refined HyOx stored up."

"I can't imagine," Dane said. "Schedule the refuel now. I'm going. I'll need a crew of two. Any volunteers?" Dane watched her entire staff desperately trying to disappear under the table. "Okay, it isn't exactly a plum assignment. Chances are very good it's just some reckless cowboy with a broken radio. You're going to be stuck on *Farchild* for three months en route with me, then you'll be cooling your heels out on a TNO for God knows how long. Pretty crummy, right? But maybe you'll be the first to meet an extrasolar sentient. Just maybe, you'll make history.

"So, who wants to take this challenge?" The silence was deafening. "All right, we'll play it that way. Who's up next on the flight readiness list?"

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Dane called up the list on her data pad. "Why M. Gladstone, that's you." Seymour groaned. "And next, M. Kalnikov." Opey perked up at the mention of his name.

"Great," Lucy muttered. "The first people the aliens get to meet besides the Wernicke's Children are Seymour and Opey."

Dimitri Kalnikov should never have been an Opey. It was illegal on every world in the solar system to perform the operation that opened his brain to direct link with the AI's. The operation was risky and had to be performed before the brain had fully developed, and elective surgery on minors was against the law. But his parents had paid for the illicit surgeon on Mars to implant a computer interface in their son. At the time, they had believed that they were ensuring his future, securing for him a lucrative career as an indispensable computer consultant.

They were right. There were very few people like Dimitri in the solar system, only a handful that the AI's could directly link to. To the AI's, these people were priceless resources, their organic peripherals. Without them, the AI's were cold and logical and of limited value. But connected together, computer and human brain became much more than the sum of their parts. The AI's sought out these organic peripherals and made sure that they were treated well.

Other humans treated the Opeys with suspicion. No one knew what sort of information was exchanged between man and machine. No one knew what an AI/human interface was capable of. And anything the computers wanted so badly, that they were willing to pay so dearly for, well, that had to be dangerous, right?

Seymour stopped Dane in the corridor and held up a bottle of Earth wine and a Martian-made wrist computer. "What do you think?"

"What do I think about what? Shouldn't you be on the ship? We're taking off in ten minutes."

"A gift. Which one do you think?"

"For the extrasolars? Seymour, are you nuts? They're not going to want either of those things." She continued down the hall, and Seymour walked backward in front of her.

"Well, we have to give them something. What's your suggestion?"

"Tank of deuterium," Dane said. "We've got it covered."

"That isn't very imaginative," Seymour said. "It's like giving socks for Christmas. How about something ceremonial? A traditional gift we give strangers? That's what the wine is. Americans bring wine. The watch was Opey's idea. What did your people give strangers back in the old country?"

"Seymour, my people didn't give gifts to strangers. We gave them the clap. Now let's get on that ship."

"I'm taking the wine. Hell, if they don't like it, at least I can drink it. I chose a red. I hope that's okay." They came to the bay where *Farchild III* waited in the launch cradle.

Torrenze met them at the hatch. "I've done the last minute check. You're go for launch."

"Is the AI hooked up?" They had waited until the last minute to move

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the computer. Three computers together were far more effective than two, and they were still trying to crunch some kind of meaning out of the alien's nearly constant broadcast. So far it was still undecipherable in all forms of signal modulation known to humans. Opey would continue to work on it during the trip, while the two AI's left on SoPo2 would keep sampling the transmissions and sorting through the data. They would send packets of the information all over the solar system for analysis.

"It's on standby for the launch," Torrenze told her. "It isn't meant to take the g-forces."

"Neither are we," Seymour said as he wedged himself into the acceleration couch. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going on standby myself."

"Lights are on," Seymour said, looking out the window at the gray blister that grew out of the side of TNO-217. "But nobody seems to be home." They had received no replies to their repeated messages from the colony. The bogie itself had arrived just three weeks earlier and was orbiting the ice ball at a respectable distance. It had never stopped spewing out radio noise, and the solar system's most powerful computers had failed to make any sense of it. Dane had brought *Farchild III* in carefully, so as not to spook their guests.

The spacecraft was not obviously extrasolar in origin. Humans were creative enough to have come up with just about every possible design that would still be spaceworthy, and the visitor was rather utilitarian. It was mostly made up of a spherical fuel tank and a large fusion rocket nozzle. The crew quarters, if there were any, were probably somewhere in the middle, protected from radiation and micrometorite impacts. Other than the complete lack of external markings or decoration and the absence of a licensed transponder signal, it was exactly like any other long haul transport.

"So what's first?" Seymour asked. "The bogie or the Wernicke's people?"

"I'm going to land on the TNO," Dane said. "It looks like our visitors are already there." There was a lander parked near the colony dome, and the lack of meteorite scarring on the freshly melted ice told them it had been there only a short while. "I'll send you over to talk to these people."

"Me? Why do I have to go?"

"It's what you're good at, remember? You're the bridge between the Group and everyone else."

"How do you suggest I get inside? They won't even talk to us."

Dane shrugged and prepared to set *Farchild* down an equal distance from the visitor's lander and the colony dome. "I doubt they have to lock the door in this neighborhood. I imagine you just walk in."

In two hours, Seymour did just that. He fussed and fidgeted with his pressure suit, procrastinated and dithered about how to work the airlock on the colony dome, but finally he left *Farchild* and crossed the twenty meters of dry ice and helium snowdrifts to the only obvious entrance.

"The airlock seems to be working just fine," he said over the radio. "You're right, it isn't locked. Of course now it wants me to wait until my suit warms up before it will open the inner door."

"You've got a function on your display that will speed that up," Opey told him. "It's under environmental features."

"Got it, thanks. The door is opening now. Well, someone is home after

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all." Seymour was greeted at the door by three curious people. He stepped into the antechamber and began to remove his pressure suit.

"Hi, I hope you don't mind, I let myself in. I didn't get any response on the radio, and I wasn't sure if there was anyone in here." He set his helmet on a low bench and began to shrug off the bulky suit. "My name's Seymour Gladstone. I'm with the Coordinator Group. I'm an ombudsman."

The three people, a middle-aged man and woman, and an elderly gentleman, stared at him and said nothing.

"That's just a fancy word for go-between," Seymour went on. "I'm like an ambassador. I suppose you've noticed the space craft orbiting your little world here and the lander that's sitting outside the door? We've actually come to talk to them, but we'd sure appreciate your help." Seymour finished folding his suit as neatly as he could and placed it on the bench next to his helmet. "So, what are your names?"

"Ammma daleda kooshorol," the old man said.

"That's an interesting . . ."

"Oh la fa ma na ba baaa ba ba," the woman interrupted.

"Okay," Seymour smiled at her. "I guess that means you're a patient here, right? Which one of you is staff?" They probably didn't go in for uniforms way out here in homesteader land.

"Kalamer joggoh," the old man answered.

"I'm not quite sure I follow you. You know, I'm hypnotically conditioned to speak almost seventy languages. Sometimes it takes a few more words for the training to kick in. Sounded a little like Swahili?"

"Mencher takesov, na queltin bonto."

"Gotcha. You must be a patient, too. Well, can you show me to a member of the staff? No? Shall I try down this hallway?" The three patients followed him. "You can come along if you like."

He pushed off down a curving corridor. The walls were lined with paintings in water, oil, and acrylic. Some were quite good. They covered the entire range of art from abstract expressionism to photograph-clarity still life. There were also a few sculptures in what appeared to be ice, displayed inside glass-fronted freezer cases.

Fifteen minutes later, Seymour had collected quite a following. There were eleven people, ranging in ages from mid-twenties to late nineties, tagging along behind him through the carpeted hallways of the habitat. He found the cafeteria, several apartments, the gardens and the physical plant, but no staff offices.

"Seems odd that the staff hasn't noticed I'm here," Seymour mused. "I've got just about all the patients here with me. You'd think they'd notice some of them missing from their activities." He perched himself in a rope sling in the lounge area, and his new friends draped themselves around him, staring. Some of them babbled happily in their own private dialect, while others remained silent or hummed little tunes. A few resumed work on paintings, all abstract and all predominantly red.

"You know, maybe there is no staff. These homesteader habitats just about run themselves. I can't imagine anyone would be so dedicated as to come all the way out here to this ice ball to take care of people who can't talk." He looked around him. "Who here would like to play charades?"

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"I counted sixteen of them," Seymour said when he got back to *Farchild*. "Five women and eleven men. Not a one of them speaks a word of English or any other humanish that I could tell. They don't read either."

"So no one is taking care of them?" Opey asked.

"Oh, they seem to be taking care of themselves just fine. The colony is running well. Air is clean, food is good."

"You ate?" Dane asked.

"Just a little something. I didn't eat since breakfast. Flatbread, and something that I swear was goat cheese, although I didn't see any goat. Anyway, I got nowhere with the standard Coordinator Group spiel. I even tried to act it out. Can you imagine, diplomacy through interpretive dance?"

"Well, thanks for making the effort, Seymour. Now we'll have to come to some decision about this bogie. I don't imagine we can just suit up and board it like we did with the colony."

"We may have to do that eventually," Seymour said. "If we can't make anything out of their radio communications, we're going to have to try face to face. Or face to whatever. That's what we're here for, after all."

They managed to avoid the problem of how to board the alien lander. Three hours later, there was movement in the spacecraft. An opening on the side of the vehicle appeared and a small rover emerged.

"Doesn't look like a human design," the AI said with Opey's voice. "But there are many strange designs in the outer system. It's using rather conventional fuel cells. About four humans could comfortably fit inside, assuming standard shielding."

"That's something we can't assume. Are they headed over here?" Dane asked.

"It looks like they're heading for the colony dome."

"Should we go out there and meet them?" Seymour asked.

"Let's give them their distance," Dane answered. "We don't want to spook them." She pushed away from the window and began to suit up. "But I'm going to get ready anyway, in case they're here to cause trouble."

"What can you do if they want to cause trouble?" Seymour reached for his own suit, then pulled back. "You aren't armed, are you?"

"Would a Coordinator ever bring a weapon?" Dane asked. "Of course not. But I couldn't let them attack that colony without at least trying to help. Opey, you are transmitting this as we go, correct?"

"Yes, M. Zaniff. Standard procedure. They're at the airlock, and it's cycling for them."

"I'm going to follow them," Dane said. "You two watch the big ship and the lander carefully. If I give the signal, or if you don't hear from me every two minutes, take off."

"Be careful, Dane," Seymour said as she entered the airlock.

Dane made her way across the ice to the colony dome and cautiously peered around the rover but saw nothing. "The rover looks pretty ordinary, other than the lack of markings. Its door is closed. I'm going through the airlock."

Once through, she found an empty hallway. She removed her pressure suit in the antechamber, then pushed off down the hallway in search of

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the visitors. She found them in the cafeteria, with all sixteen Wernicke's Children seated in a circle around them. Dane drifted into the room and the people glanced at her curiously, but there was no way she could compete with the three visitors sitting in the center of the room. Dane walked around them carefully, but no one reacted to her presence. She kept her hands to herself; she didn't want to frighten them by touching anything she shouldn't be touching, but no one objected to her giving the visitors a thorough inspection.

"Well, they're not humans," Dane said into the radio clipped to her collar. "Of that we can be sure."

"So what do the extrasolars look like?" Seymour asked.

"They're liquid," Dane told him.

"What does that mean, they're liquid?"

"I can't think of any other way to put it, Seymour. The extrasolars are tanks of liquid. Cylindrical clear tanks of red liquid on mechanical carts. There are three of them and they're hooked up together with clear tubing, and red liquid is moving through the tubing. The carts are quite simple. I'm very close to coming to the conclusion that the liquid is the intelligent part of this setup."

"Red? Like blood?"

Dane considered for a moment. "Thinner than blood," she decided.

"How can a liquid thinner than blood be intelligent?"

Dane said nothing for several seconds. "I don't know, Seymour. I have no experience that would allow me to speculate on the minimum viscosity requirements for an intelligent liquid."

"Like wine?" Opey asked.

"That's right," Dane said.

She heard the sound of Seymour slapping his forehead. "I can't give them the wine! That would be the most bizarre kind of insult. Like if you met someone and gave them a puppet that looked just like them. Too creepy. Oh, well. I guess we'll just have to drink it ourselves. The sacrifices we make for the Group. Are you sure there's nothing solid in the tanks that's doing the thinking?"

Dane sighed. "Short of grabbing one of them and forcing it through a strainer, I can't say. Probably not a good idea at this point."

"So what are they doing over there?" Opey asked.

"Not much. The Wernicke's people are just sitting around and staring at the extrasolars, and the extrasolars are just sitting in the middle of the room and gurgling. I'll set up a camera to make some recordings to send back to Solar Prime. We'll have to search the gurgles for a pattern. They may be trying to communicate."

"I hope they have better luck than I did," Seymour said.

"What do you think about calling them the Baccha?"

Dane looked up from her analysis of the alien technology, which so far included the nearly featureless interstellar ship, the lander, the six-wheeled rover and the mechanical carts. Her analysis so far: the visitors could build things that worked. A lot of the parts looked accreted, by some process like electrolysis, but some were machined. Seymour didn't believe

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that liquid creatures could manufacture a space craft, that they must have had some help from another industrial race. Dane accused him of being a solidist, but otherwise ignored his theories.

"Call who, Seymour?"

"The visitors, of course. The extrasolars. You know, after Bacchus, the ancient Greek god of wine."

Dane frowned at him. "Why do you fill your head with such useless information? Do we have to name them? Can't we just wait until they tell us who they are before we go off stamping them with some ancient Greek moniker?"

Seymour dismissed that suggestion with a wave. "Oh, they'll just tell us they're the People, like everyone does. That's just, well, boring."

Dane shook her head. "I saw them first, and I get the right to name them. I choose to let them name themselves."

"Well," Seymour said. "It's like this, Dane. I already sort of leaked the name Baccha into my last report. And you know how Sol Prime is. Once they get something in their jaws, it's hard to pull it back out again."

Dane sighed. "It isn't going to make any difference unless we can talk to them. Any progress, Opey?"

Opey was in deep conference with the AI. It took a few seconds for the human to swim up from the connection. "We can detect no pattern to the gurgles," Opey and the wall speakers said simultaneously. "The connection between the tanks and the mechanical carts is exceedingly simple. Changes in pressure in the tubing tell the carts which way to go. We assume that all of their equipment interfaces work in a similar way. There is not enough complexity of signal to extrapolate to a language." He called up a screen on his display. "The NMR collar you clipped to the tubing shows complex organic molecules in the red liquid. There is no pattern to the molecules flowing through the tubing between the tanks."

"Then what are they doing in there?" In the two days since they had set up cameras inside the Wernicke's Children habitat, they had watched a succession of visitors and cult members sit in one another's company in the lounge area. When the visitors were present, they sat and gurgled. The humans took turns sitting and smiling. Sometimes they hummed or babbled or painted, or made meaningless gestures, but mostly they just sat and smiled. And had tea.

"The Wernicke's Children and the Baccha are keeping each other company." Apparently Opey had been paying enough attention to pick up on the new name for the visitors.

Dane slammed her fist into her palm. "Why do they keep going over there? Why do the visitors feel the need to keep company with brain damaged mutes?"

Even Seymour could see that Dane didn't want an answer. She pushed over to the communications console and began reading the latest status report from the linguistics operation. "And why do they keep broadcasting radio waves that make no sense? There is no pattern in any of this. Nothing has been repeated since they began." She whacked the side of the console. "What's the point?"

She bounced expertly around the small space that was *Farchild*'s main

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cabin. Seymour and Opey ducked to avoid her nervous pacing. "I don't ask much," she said. "I just want to know where they're from and why they're here."

"Well, I'm sure they'd be happy to tell us if it weren't for the language barrier," Seymour said.

"We're the Coordinator Group," Dane said. "We don't have language barriers. We're the ones who help other people communicate. We're the god damned experts. But those buckets of juice are over there sitting around with people who can't even talk to each other. How much more stupid can this situation get?" A chime answered her.

"There's a message incoming," Seymour said, pulling over to the communications console that Dane had just been beating up. "It's from Solar Prime."

"What's it about?" Dane asked. "Good news or bad news?"

"Weird news," Seymour said. "Remember how we were told that these Wernicke's Children were brain damaged because of a stroke or trauma?" His back was turned so he didn't see Dane's finger making a circle, telling him to skip ahead to what she didn't know. "Well, we assumed wrong. These people are part of a cult. They did this to themselves deliberately."

"Let me see that," Dane said, shouldering Seymour aside. "Oh, this is perfect. Some guru convinced these people that language is a barrier to true communication. They all had their Wernicke's areas surgically ablated."

According to the memo, the original charter for the Wernicke's Children colony was written by a psychologist named Sun Park. She theorized that people who had come by Wernicke's aphasia naturally were able to understand their fellow humans on a deeper level than anyone burdened with language. She had convinced all of these people to have the surgery, and she had found a surgeon who was morally challenged enough to do it to them. Dr. Park had declined the treatment herself, preferring instead to observe the results. She had helped her followers set up the colony, but had left three years after the start of the experiment and had never returned.

Dr. Park had claimed, at the beginning, that the whole thing was a scientific study, not a cult. But there was one major flaw in her experimental design. Something so obvious even a high school student could see it. The results were locked up in the minds of the subjects. There was no way to unblind the study. It may well have worked. The colonists may have had the most profound understanding of one another. But they weren't telling anyone.

"So I guess the situation can get stupider after all," Dane said. "Not only are the aliens ignoring us in favor of brain damaged mutes, but now we find out that the mutes are crazy on top of that. Just perfect."

"Seymour, if you drop this box I'm going to kick you right off of this rock."

All three of them struggled to get their cargo out of the airlock of *Farchild.* It wasn't heavy in this gravity, but it was bulky and extremely fragile.

"I'm standing on a patch of ice," Seymour whined.

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"It's all ice," Dane said. "And it isn't slippery at this temperature. You've been out here before."

"Not carrying an AI," Seymour answered. "Wouldn't it have been easier to run some cable?"

"No way to get the signal through *Farchild*'s hull and the wall of the habitat," Opey said. He had his corner perfectly steady. He needed the AI as much as it needed him.

Seymour continued to mumble as they maneuvered the bulky computer through the airlock of the habitat. Once inside they were met by two of the cult members. When the homesteaders saw it was humans and not Baccha, they turned and drifted back to the lounge.

Seymour watched them go as he set aside his helmet. "Last time I was here they couldn't get enough of me. How soon they forget."

"You two get this thing set up in the lounge," Dane said. "I'll go back for the power supply."

The lounge was little changed from the last time Dane had visited. This time, there were four tanks of red liquid connected together in an intricate web by clear tubing. Cult members lolled around the room curled into silk hammocks or twisted around wood perches. They took a mild interest in the large gray box Seymour and Opey were carrying, but none of them got up for a closer look. Some of them watched the Baccha, others looked out into space. There was the usual amount of humming and babbling and gesturing from the humans, and sitting and gurgling from the Baccha.

"I never thought I'd ever see a room in such desperate need for canasta," Seymour said, shaking his head. "Mah jong. Something." He wandered around the room while Opey set up the AI. The ombudsman found one of the Wernicke's Children painting a landscape in watercolor and watched over her shoulder. With a start, he recognized the pink and tan art deco sweep of South Beach. A spectacular red sunset lit up a few clouds in the sky, and the neon was just starting to flicker to life. For a moment, he was back home, feeling the sand under his toes. "That's remarkable," he told the woman. "I used to live in that hotel, right there. Are you from Florida, too?" But of course the woman didn't answer, didn't even acknowledge his presence.

He looked more closely at her face. He wasn't even sure he'd seen this woman on his last visit. He called up the original colony charter on his wrist computer and scanned the list of faces. He matched the painter with her image, twelve years younger. She hadn't aged much. Stress free life. And she wasn't from Florida, she was born on the Moon. Had probably never even been to Earth.

Seymour took one more look at the half-finished painting and shook his head. Not a coincidence, he decided. How in the hell had she known?

Opey inspected the casing of the AI for signs of damage. It was capable of enduring cold and vacuum, but the warm-up in the habitat airlock had worried him. He was also concerned about humidity in a room with so many active tea cups and not enough gravity to keep things under control.

"Oh, stop fussing with it," Seymour told him. "You're like a mother hen."

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"If I lost this," Opey said, "it would be like you losing one of your senses." He glanced around the room. "Or like becoming one of them."

Seymour shuddered in spite of himself. "Not being able to talk," he said. "I can't imagine."

"Oh, I think I might get to like it," Dane said, lugging the power supply. "I'll plug this in on my end, and Opey, you take your end of the cable."

"Make sure you give him the right one, Dane. I'd hate to send 800 raw amps into the kid's skull."

Dane ignored Seymour as she fired up the power supply. She checked the green lights all the way down the line, then gave Opey the thumbs up. Opey parted the hair on the side of his head, and socketed the cable into the opening there.

Seymour watched Opey drift into communion with the computer, his eyes getting that faraway look, his muscle tone softening. "Are you sure this is the only way we can talk to them?"

"We aren't sure of anything," Dane said. "This might be a total waste of time. It's all we've got left. The visitors won't come to visit us, so we've got to come here to try to talk to them. I think the radio broadcasts are a false lead. They're not really trying to talk to us that way. Maybe they'll be more forthcoming in person."

Seymour pulled Dane over to the painting he had seen earlier. "I think the Wernicke's Children may be on to something. Look, this woman's painting my home town." He looked down at the chair, but the painter was not the woman who was sitting there before. An elderly man had picked up the brush and taken up where she left off. "It was a woman before."

"That's great, Seymour." Dane glanced at the painting, then back at Opey. He wasn't in the zone yet, but he was getting there.

"They've got some kind of communication going on here," Seymour told her. "They met me once, for a couple of hours, and now they're painting my beach. How did they figure out where I lived? Right down to the hotel where I grew up."

"I don't know, Seymour, your accent? Did you happen to blab about it while you were trying to talk to them? You know how you are."

"Right, so they figured out I was from Florida, but right down to the hotel where I lived? Dane, they're not just mutes. They can't understand a word we're saying."

"So they're very sensitive to things like accent and mannerisms," Dane said, still distracted by Opey. "It isn't like they're got much else to occupy their minds."

"Maybe they did it for someone else, too. Opey, where did you grow up?"

"TeknoKlass Station, Mars orbit," Opey said.

"I don't know what that looks like, I've never been there," Seymour said. He began scanning the other unfinished paintings in the room. As before, they were mostly abstracts, with a lot of red. "They're going to run out of red paint here before long. Nope, I don't see anything that looks like a space station. How about you, Dane?"

"Seymour, drop it," Dane said. "I didn't grow up in a red blob. So they painted South Beach. Big deal. What is your point?"

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"Not just South Beach, Dane. *My* South Beach." Seymour pointed at the watercolor. "That painting says home to me. These people can't understand a word we're saying, and yet they picked this up. What do you think they might be picking up from the Baccha?"

"Don't be stupid," Dane said. "We've got Sol's best linguists working on this problem without result. These people are the opposite of linguists."

"Maybe that's what we need. Thank you." Seymour took a cup of steaming tea from one of their hosts. Dane and Opey got cups too. Dane set hers down untouched.

Opey sipped his and smiled. "Lemon grass? Did you put lemon grass in this tea?" Of course there was no answer. "My mother used to put lemon grass in the tea." He took another sip and set the cup down carefully well away from the AI.

Seymour started to say something, but Dane pulled him out into the hallway. She held up one finger and he fell silent. "An interesting phenomenon, Seymour. Not a way to talk to an alien intelligence. Let Opey work and forget about the Wernicke's Children."

"They probably don't even use language," Seymour was saying. She had tuned him out, but this caught her attention.

"Who, the Baccha?"

Seymour grinned. "So you like my name after all? Yes, the Baccha might not even need language. Just think of it, how can a liquid be an individual? Back home on Bacchus there's probably a whole sentient ocean. These tanks are just temporary extensions of the main mind. Take those tubes that hook them together. . . ."

"We looked into that," Dane said. "There's no information flowing through those tubes between the Baccha. That was another dead end."

"You're missing my point. I'm not talking about tank-to-tank communication. I'm saying that the tubes link them together into one mind."

"Then why separate into individual tanks in the first place?" Dane asked. "Why not just one big tank instead of three or four smaller ones?"

Seymour shrugged. "Get a wider perspective when you split them up, I guess." He thought a minute and laughed.

"What now?"

"Kind of funny when you think about it. The Wernicke's Children seem to be fusing together into one group mind. They even finish one another's paintings. It was undoubtedly the operation that cut out their speech centers that catalyzed that. Without language to separate them, the Wernicke's Children might be fusing together into one mind. The Baccha, on the other hand, don't need language because they were one mind to begin with."

"Conjecture and hand waving," Dane said. She pushed off from the wall and stuck her head into the lounge. "What's taking him so long?" Opey was still connected, but he didn't act the way he usually did when he was in deep conference with the AI. He mingled with the Wernicke's Children, looking at their paintings, joining them in humming little tunes, and drinking their tea. He'd been in there over an hour and he showed no signs of finishing whatever he was doing.

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"You know, Dane, language isn't everything," Seymour said.

Dane looked back at him but said nothing.

"You make a big deal out of being a Coordinator. Hell, it's important to me, too." Dane started to say something but he talked over her. "Yeah, I make jokes, but that doesn't mean I hate the job. We help people get things done. Without us, the solar system is either a lawless frontier or a totalitarian nightmare. But we don't do it all with language."

"You're an ombudsman," Dane said. "How can you say that? Your whole job is communication."

"Communication, yes, but it's not all language. Dane, I speak a lot of languages. I probably even know your native language, if you'd ever loosen up and tell me what it is." Dane snapped her head around to glare at him. He smiled at her reaction. "But you can learn a lot more about a person just by watching them. Maybe we shouldn't be trying to talk to the Baccha, the way we think about talking."

"Seymour, there has to be a way to talk to them. We will figure this out. It will just take time."

Seymour shrugged. "Maybe we will. If anyone can do it, you can. I'm just trying to prepare you for the possibility that it isn't a language barrier at all."

"Then what is it?"

"If they don't use language," Seymour said, "you're trying to solve the wrong problem."

Finally, Opey came out of his trance, pulled the connector out of the side of his head, and gestured Dane and Seymour to come inside.

"So, what did you find?" Dane asked. "Were you able to communicate with them?"

Opey nodded. "Not very well. It's slow going, and what I got is difficult to put into words."

"Did you at least find out where they're from and why they came here?"

Opey gave her a blank look, then shook his head. "Oh, no, I wasn't able to talk to the Baccha. I was talking about the Wernicke's Children. They're the ones I . . . well, I didn't talk to them, exactly, but I . . . I guess I became one of them for a while."

"One of them?" Seymour gestured around the room at the Wernicke's Children. "You lost your Wernicke's area?"

Opey nodded. "The AI took it offline. I can't remember why we decided to do it, but it worked."

"You were supposed to talk to the aliens, not the mutes." Dane threw up her hands in disgust. "You're going to have to go back in there and get it right this time."

"I can't talk to the Baccha," Opey protested. "But they can." He nodded at a woman who drifted between Dane and himself, singing a wordless tune. "Well, not talk. That's the wrong word. They commune with the Baccha."

"How do you know this?" Dane asked.

"I became one of them," Opey answered. "I couldn't commune with the aliens myself." His eyes got a faraway look. "I feel like I just caught a

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glimpse of what they have with each other. And now the Baccha are somehow part of that group."

"Language gets in the way," Seymour said. "And Opey only lost his temporarily. The fact that he can tell us about it means his language center didn't go completely offline."

"This is stupid," Dane snapped. "You feel that you communed with the mutes, and you feel that the mutes communed with the Baccha, but you can't tell us about it using language because it all happens only if language isn't possible. Convenient. Well, let's get this equipment back to *Farchild*." She began shutting down the AI and unplugging the power supply. "Fat lot of good it did us. We're going to have to wait for more sophisticated computers." She glanced up at Opey. "And more experienced operators. Will you idiots help me with this damned power supply?"

Seymour and Opey drifted over to her and began fumbling with the wires. One of the Baccha detached itself from the others and began trundling out into the hallway, the fluid in the jar sloshing against the sides in the low gravity. Dane lifted the power supply and began to follow the alien to the airlock, but she stopped in the doorway and the machinery drifted to the floor to land with a thud.

"Who is that singing?" she said.

Seymour glanced around the room. It seemed every one was humming some little tune. He shrugged. "Singing what?"

Dane sang a few lines of a song in an obscure language. The tune was lilting and strange. Seymour's language hypnotraining couldn't place the dialect, but it sounded Eastern European. He quickly found the young man who was singing the same song. He pointed, and Dane jumped over to the man. They started singing in harmony, Dane using the words while the man just hummed.

"Where did you hear that song?" Dane asked him. Of course, he didn't answer.

"So, he knows a song that you know," Seymour said. "This is supposed to impress me?"

Dane turned on him. "Nobody knows this song, Seymour. What the hell did you tell these people about me?"

"I don't know anything about you. You won't talk. But they don't need talk. I told you."

"This isn't like the painting," Dane said. "Or the tea. This is personal. This is about me. How the hell did they know?"

"It is like the picture," Seymour said. "If you'd only listen." He pointed at the watercolor, now finished. "That's *my* South Beach. That's *Opey's* tea. And now we have *your* song. I don't know how they know, but they do."

Dane looked back at the man, but he wasn't humming anymore. He was babbling incoherently and making odd gestures with his hands and feet. "They know," Dane whispered. "They know us," She looked over at Opey, "and they know the Baccha."

"So it would appear," Seymour agreed. He patted one of the tanks of red liquid. "We can't talk to them, but we have our ambassadors."

"Our brain damaged diplomats," Dane shook her head. "Ugh, what a mess. You need one illegal brain surgery to talk to the aliens," she ges-

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tured around the room, then patted Opey on the shoulder, "and another to talk to the ambassadors." She slumped into a hammock, suddenly overwhelmed with the iceball's feeble gravity. "It isn't pretty, but it will have to do. So tell me, Opey, where did they come from?"

Opey pointed at one of the abstract paintings. It was an acrylic of swirling reds with transparent drops suspended in it. "That's supposed to represent their home."

Seymour peered at the canvas. "Doesn't look like much to me, but they did get my home right. Did they happen to mention why they came here?"

Opey shook his head. "That's . . . not the sort of question you can ask about the Baccha. They don't have reasons for doing things, or at least none that we could understand."

"Do those radio transmissions they've been broadcasting have any significance?" Dane asked. "Or can we tell the translators to pack it in?"

"Radio tickles," Opey told her. "We tickled them, and they're just tickling us back."

Seymour laughed. "We'd better stop before somebody wets themselves."

Dane and Opey laughed too, breaking the tension, and then the whole room erupted in laughter. The reaction of the Wernicke's Children surprised the Coordinators and that just set everyone off again.

"Wets themselves," Dane said, wiping her eyes. "Okay. What about how did they get here?" She asked.

"There's a song about that," Opey said. "No words, of course. I'll try and get one of them to sing it to you. It starts out slow, but it ends happy." O

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Chats about *The Knight*, Book One of the Wizard Knight series.

Legends II Chat **January 27 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
Join Raymond Feist, George R.R. Martin, and Tad Williams in a chat about the new blockbuster anthology! One lucky chatter will receive a copy of the slipcased and gold-foil stamped limited edition, which has been signed by every author in the book.

Go to **www.scifi.com/chat** or link to the chats via our home page (**www.asimovs.com**). Chats are held in conjunction with *Analog* and the Sci-fi Channel and are moderated by *Asimov's* editor, Gardner Dozois.

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REWIND

Jack Skillingstead

While tending bar in a French restaurant, Jack Skillingstead conceived the idea that "there might to be a connection between beer and God consciousness. "More recently I found myself wandering the Pike Place Market in Seattle during a fair. I sat in the shade in the beer garden, and drank a couple of Redhook Ales, and 'Rewind' occurred to me. I wrote it the next day."

I was reaching for my pint glass of Red Hook when the first explosion ripped through the beer garden. My fingertips had just touched the glass. In an instant the world was reorganized. Only it didn't have much to do with organization, come to think of it. The table I'd been sitting in front of was now sitting *on top* of me. Of course, it may not have been the same table. Debris lay scattered around. Some of it was human debris. The right side of my face felt scorched. It couldn't have been the fire, because that hadn't started yet. That came with explosion number two.

I lay there, rattled. People were moaning and crying, some were screaming. I heard it all through wads of cotton cranked into my ears. And of course the bells. I could still feel the cold, moisture-filmed glass on my fingertips. I concentrated on that and on the moments preceding as my hand reached for the glass of copper-tinted ale, but this time I cut off the explosion and let my hand grip the pint glass and raise it to my lips, tasted the cold Red Hook slide over my tongue. For several moments I existed in two realities, it seemed. In the first I'd just been blown out of my chair, in the second my consciousness meandered forward uninterrupted by horror.

I'd been thinking about that ale for quite a while as I wandered the Pike Place Market Fair. It was a warm May afternoon in Seattle, around eighty degrees. When I came upon a large grouping of tables under white umbrellas and enclosed by a low fence, I turned in and looked for a seat. The beer garden was crowded. There was a street musician in a straw hat playing pretty good acoustic guitar on a stage a dozen yards from the fenced-in area. I spotted a table with an empty chair. A young woman with short dark hair and lavender sunglasses sat by herself. I asked if I could take the empty seat, and she nodded with one of those neutral smiles you give strangers whom you don't wish to encourage. I took the chair and hitched it back to let her know that I wasn't there to hit on her. Then I ordered my Red Hook, it arrived, I reached for it . . . and ka BOOM! My illusion of duel realities collapsed.

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The young woman was sitting on the ground holding her head, her sunglasses crooked on her nose. Her eyes looked frightened but rational. They were big brown Audrey Hepburn eyes occupying a plain face, and she turned them to me and we held each other's gaze. I shoved the table off, stood up and went to her.

"Are you all right?" I asked, my voice muffled in my ringing ears. She nodded. I extended my hand, she grasped it, and I pulled her to her feet. That's when the second explosion went off. The concussion shuddered through my body, staggering me sideways. It did something worse to the young woman with the brown eyes. It sent a hunk of white metal spinning into her waist, almost ripping her in half. I saw it in slow motion as the world tilted drunkenly and I fell, a hot, violent odor blowing over me, and then I saw red flames devour the blue, blue sky.

A mild concussion, two cracked ribs, a wicked abrasion on my right cheek (this is what felt "scorched" immediately after the first explosion), a fractured middle toe. Sundry cuts, scrapes, contusions, etc. Two days in a Group Health hospital. I walked out of there with Frankenstein stitches and a limp, glad to be alive but with a depressed feeling clinging to me like a low-grade fever.

My best friend picked me up in his sixties era Volkswagen Beetle. I liked to think of Sean as a practical poet. He was twenty-three years old, sported a soul patch on his chin and round steel frame glasses. He had found the frames in a Wallingford antique store and had his prescription fitted to them. He liked to write poems in coffee houses on The Ave, scratching them out with the nib of a black ink fountain pen, filling small notebooks. All of which should have added up to capital-A affectation. But somehow with Sean it didn't. He was a good guy, a good listening ear. He was also one of those perpetual students who manipulate majors and minors with the finesse of a concert pianist. That was his practical side. I was already a year out of college and coping, after a fashion, with real life. In other words, I was underemployed as a record store clerk and spent my evenings trying to tweak my résumé into something irresistible.

"You've got the look," Sean said as we pulled away from the hospital with a lawn mower whine of the VW's engine.

"Which look is that?"

"The look of someone who's been blown up. The look of bells ringing in your ears. Well, buddy, they didn't toll for thee, so come back to planet Earth and I'll buy you a beer.

"Bells I could live with.

"What *can't* you live with?"

"Forget it."

"I would," Sean said, "But forgetting things isn't so easy nowadays. You want to go to Dante's? I'm buying."

I stared out the window, feeling a bit unreal. "Thanks, but I really just want to go home."

"If you're turning down free beer then the center really *will not* hold," Sean said. And then, with uncharacteristic bitterness: "Fuck Jihad."

* * *

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In my apartment I made coffee and sat out on the postage stamp-sized sun porch with my feet on the rail and *Details of a Sunset and Other Stories* tented open, unread, on my lap. Three floors down some guy was washing his car and he had the radio turned up loud and tuned to an alternative rock station. My ribs hurt every time I breathed. My toe hurt whether I breathed or not. I began playing a game we've all played, the game of WHAT IF, the game of IF ONLY.

The young woman's name had been Janice Burnley. Her image haunted me. The girl with the Audrey Hepburn eyes, her goofy lavender glasses crooked on her face, her hand reaching out. I took it back a couple of minutes to her reserved smile and nod when I asked if I could share her table. I ran through it to the point at which I reached for my Red Hook Ale, but before my fingertips touched the cold glass I hesitated, and at that intersection in my reality rewind I seemed caught in a double suspended moment. The car radio below me swelled, faded, swelled again, faded out altogether, and there was guitar music coming from the street musician standing outside the beer garden.

I was *there*.

My table companion was watching the guitar player, her fingers tapping along. I stared at the line of her jaw, the way her hair spiked over the delicate shell of her ear, which looked fiercely pink in a cunning bar of sunlight that had penetrated the umbrella cover. Then the first bomb went off.

I shoved the table off me and bolted up, the blood and screaming all around, and I couldn't shut it out. Again the girl sat on the ground with no apparent injuries, even looking a little comical with her glasses cockeyed. I knew what was coming and I didn't wait for it to happen. I threw myself over Janice Burnley, knocking her flat just as the second explosion tore through.

"How are we doing today?" my morning nurse asked me.

"Okay. A little dreamy."

"Still dreamy?"

"Yeah."

The doctor came by and frowned at my chart for a while. He couldn't figure out the "dreamy" aspect of my recovery. Everything else looked good.

"I suppose it's just plain disorienting to get blown up," I said.

"It is definitely that," he said.

Dreamy. Not a big deal. On the first day of my second convalescence I had lain in my hospital bed and stared at the television set. All the colors sort of ran together, like one of those light boxes from the Summer of Love that was supposed to simulate an acid trip. The guy in the next bed held the remote. I said, "Why don't you change the channel?"

"You don't like Katie Couric?" He was in his fifties, with an equine face and a beach ball belly lifting the bed sheet.

"I like her fine."

"So?"

"So that isn't Katie Couric."

He squinted at the TV. "Yes, it is."

Gooey colors oozed over the screen. "Look at the picture," I said.

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"I *am* looking at the picture."
"And you see Katie Couric?"
"No."
"Ha."
"I see Matt Whatshisface. Katie's not on right now."
"You don't see a bunch of weird colors?"

He shook his head, his lips pressed into a skeptical line. I let it drop. And I stopped looking at the set, because after a while the colors had a nauseating effect. It wasn't just the picture, either. The sound issuing from the speaker was nothing more articulate than a fly buzz that rose and fell with inflective randomness. When the nurse wandered in I asked her what was on the TV. My roommate gave me a sour look, and the nurse glanced up and said, "A dog food commercial."

"A dog food commercial," the man in the next bed said flatly.

I told the doctor about the TV. Soon enough we discovered it wasn't only the TV. Computer screens presented incomprehensible jigsaw patterns. My senses now scrambled everything that came filtered through electronic media. Even a voice modulated through the phone came to my ear drum like a mosquito whine.

I guess they gave me every test they could think of but it got them nowhere. I departed the hospital with little more than a fond hope that it would all "clear up."

It didn't.

"How do you explain that?" Sean asked me, looking every bit as skeptical as my former roommate with the beach ball belly. We were sitting at a window table in Bean There, a java joint on Forty-Fifth, a couple of miles from the UW.

"I think I got to rewind an event and play it different," I said, kind of making it up as I went.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Only in this new version I'm one half step removed. You know how when you see a computer screen or a TV screen in the background of a news shot or whatever? You know how you see this black bar scroll up the image?"

Sean nodded.

"Well, that's what I mean. I guess."

"Oh, now I understand perfectly."

"You're not trying."

"Give me some help."

"I'm like a second tier observer now," I said. "When I'm pointed at first tier reality, I can absorb it mostly okay, but second tier reality—electronic media, for instance—gets scrambled because I'm already a step away."

"I thought you said you were a *half* step away."

I sipped my latte and looked out the window at slow traffic. Sean tapped his pen on the table. "All right, all right," he said. "Sorry. It's just pretty far-fetched."

"I know."

"Anyway, why do you get to rewind the event thing? No offense, but what makes you so special?"

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"I don't know. Maybe I'm not the only one. Maybe there are others and we just don't know about it."

"It's never happened to me."

"A lot of things have never happened to you. That doesn't mean they don't happen to other people. And maybe after a while, the rewinder forgets that he ever *did* rewind."

"Perhaps."

"Yeah, perhaps."

Then Sean said, "Hey, I just remembered what makes you so special."

"Yeah?"

"You got blown up last month."

"True."

"But that's not all that happened. You also got to save somebody's life."

"On the rewind."

"Right, that's what I mean. You got to make a deliberate moral decision. You think it's BS, but I believe in the moral Universe, the moral God-consciousness. Maybe you're right about people, maybe a lot of people are getting to rewind. Maybe that's how God increases moral consciousness in the world, which equals love, which equals *higher* consciousness. God consciousness." Sean gripped his pen, looking pleased with himself.

"That's nice," I said, "but your theory falls apart, because I didn't make a moral decision. All I did was react, unaware of any personal consequences."

"So you wouldn't have saved her if you'd known you couldn't watch TV anymore?"

"Or hear a voice on a telephone, or work a computer, or lately even an electronic cash register? If I knew it would get worse, like it *is* getting worse? If I thought it would make me incapable of functioning in modern society? If I thought this mild background buzz might get louder and more insistent until I thought I would go out of my mind? I don't know, man. But I guess at that point it certainly would become a decision instead of a reaction."

"You're right," Sean said. "The theory doesn't hold water. But it's still cool, and I'm going to write a poem about it. I'm going to call it The Jihad Bomb Theory of Moral God-Consciousness."

"Do that," I said.

So I had to find out. Naturally I had to find out. There was a constant buzzing in my ears. I couldn't hear it much during the day, but in the stillness of the night it was insistent and distracting, robbing me of sleep. I thought maybe it had something to do with all the broadcast and microwave signals in the air. I sat on my sofa and began thinking about the beer garden, Janice Burnley, and the bombs.

Sean removed his little round poet's glasses and wiped the lenses on his T-shirt. Sunlight slanted though the window of Dante's, shining up the amber pints on the table before us. I was now living in a Universe where The Jihad Bomb Theory of Moral God-Consciousness did not as yet exist. Looking over Sean's shoulder I could see the Mariners game on ESPN. I hadn't touched my beer yet. Sean listened to everything I told him. He's a good listener, but I can tell when he thinks I'm full of it. That

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didn't really matter, though. I just wanted to say it all out loud, as a way of organizing and understanding my thoughts, such as they were.

"So you went back to your apartment and rewound everything again?" he said. "Rewind is the right word?"

"Yeah. I found out I could do that."

"And this time you let things go back to the way they were originally?"

"Yes."

"The girl died. But you say she lived in your other version?"

"I let her die."

He frowned at me. "Cut it out."

"It's true."

"If you say so."

"I do say so. I watched it all again. I looked into her eyes, and then I hesitated long enough for the second bomb to go off and cut her in half."

"Okay, okay. Then what?"

"Then nothing. I'm here, all my senses intact, and the future looks promising."

"Except?"

"Except I let the girl die."

"So you said."

"It's a hell of a thing," I said. "For quite a while, during my latest convalescence, I ragged on myself for not checking her out last time, finding out all I could about her when I had the chance. Talk to her, at least."

"The girl with the Hepburn eyes."

"Yeah, Janice. Janice Burnley. Anyway, I wished I'd found out what kind of a person she was, whether she was—"

"A good person?"

"I don't know."

"Whether she kicks her dog, runs red lights, cheats on her boyfriend? Or volunteers at some retirement home and adopts stray cats?"

I shrugged. "Something like that, I guess. But then I figured it didn't matter. Because that's not part of the decision. It's whether or not I can do the right thing, and whether or not I even know what the right thing *is*. The point being, now I have a decision to make. A real decision."

"To rewind or not to rewind, that is the question."

I shaped my lips into a smile and nodded. "Yeah."

Throngs moved outside the window of this bar on the Ave. Normal people on their way through life. Maybe a certain percentage of them had rewound. Who knows? A scraggly man sat on the sidewalk across the street with a hand-lettered sign and a mangy dog curled beside him. He looked like one of those guys who hears things nobody else hears, maybe, who knows, a constant mosquito whine that has drilled into his brain until his thoughts have broken up and can never quite come together again.

"So if I play along," Sean said, "and assume all this wild shit is true, then what's next? What are you going to do?"

"That's a good question," I said, but I wasn't really there anymore. I could hear acoustic guitar music, and there was a young woman looking away from me, one young woman out of millions I would never know, and my hand reached out until my fingertips touched the cold, moisture-filmed glass of ale, and it all started again for the last time. ❍

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R. Garcia y Robertson recently finished the third novel, *White Rose,* in his new trilogy. It will be out sometime this year from Forge. The first two books, *Knight Errant* (2002) and *Lady Robyn* (2003), were also published by Forge. Mr. Garcia's most recent story for us, "Ring Rats" (April 2002), was set in the same universe as the breathtaking adventures that occur during the . . .

LONG VOYAGE HOME

R. Garcia y Robertson

Pressure Depth

3:03:02 AM, aboard *Amelia Earhart,* Orca

Hello, is anyone out there? My bio-section teammates are dead. Everyone else aboard *Earhart* is dead. The ship herself is in shit shape. Doomed for sure. Hell of a note to open on, but someone has to tell what happened. This is Student Cadet Rachel Naomi Mohammed-Cohen, assigned to survey-ship *Amelia Earhart.* I released an emergency buoy with a fifty-klick filament into Orca's troposphere, and all I hear is my own distress beacon. The planet comnet is gone. So is the system net. No traffic whatsoever. Which means everyone in-system must be dead. Well almost everyone—someone up there might be alive. But the way no one else is even calling for help seems awfully damned ominous.

Things down here pretty ominous as well. *Earhart* is hanging head down at her pressure depth. Gravity drive is out. So is her mass converter. Auxiliary power is spotty at best. Right now I am in absolute darkness, trapped in a dying ship under twenty atmospheres of pressure, sinking in a planet-wide ocean topped by a toxic atmosphere. Bulkheads have failed throughout . . . (LOUD GROAN)

* * *

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Make that are failing. Rachel stopped talking to listen, her hand frozen in front of her tear-stained face. Damp black hair clung to her pale cheek, lit a soft glowing blue by the tiny screen on her wrist. Her mini-image in the screen looked back at her in horror, soft lips trembling, dark eyes wide and staring. Seventeen standard years old, Rachel was born in interstellar transit—Epsilon Eridani to Keid A—aboard the mother-ship *Nefertiti,* which she wished she'd never left. The groan grew louder, turning into a saw-toothed wail that set her teeth on edge, ending in an even more horrifying bang.

. . . Got to go!

Deafened and afraid, Rachel used the lit screen on her wrist to help her hand find the tilted bulkhead. According to Damage Control, high pressure sea water was filling the breached compartments, raising *Earhart* 's relative density, making her sink deeper, crushing more compartments, dragging the ship still deeper. Digits flashed on the mini-screen's depth indicator, recording the downward tumble. Unless Rachel found a way up to the surface, no one would hear anything she said—not aboard a flattened ship on a poisonous planet, in an uninhabited system light years from nowhere. She would not be recording messages if she had anyone to talk to, aside from the relentlessly upbeat synthesized voices at Damage Control.

There were dozens of ways to get off the stricken ship—three airlocks, the main cargo doors, numerous emergency exits, none very useful at the moment. *Earhart* even had a jettisonable command compartment, pressurized to forty atmospheres. But the missile impact had been up forward, taking out the control deck and plunging the ship into chaos. Asleep in her cabin when the missile hit, Rachel awoke to the wailing alarm, and the Watch Officer shouting over the comnet:

"Missile incoming, ZERO ONE ZERO+20° , prepare to . . ."

Then the explosion. Her biotech team had been assigned to forward-obs, combing through sea water samples, looking for alien life. When the forward hull collapsed, the ocean came rushing in, crushing them all—according to the friendly computer voices at Damage Control.

She tried to work her way aft, which was now "up," as the flooded sections pulled *Earhart* 's nose down. There was another pressurized escape capsule aft, made for just such an emergency—if she could get to it. Guided by the light on her wrist, she groped her way to an open corridor headed aft, a dark narrow shaft angling up into blackness. Halfway up the corridor was the midships airlock, stocked with lights and emergency supplies. She knew the lock was still intact, because it had responded to her calls—releasing the emergency buoy that let her know she was alone in the system. Raising her wrist to her lips, she told the lock to turn on its lights, and open its inner door.

Light flooded down from a pale white circle above her. Something to aim for. Pulling herself up into the corridor, she braced her back against

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one bulkhead, pressed her feet against the other, and began to inch upward, fighting Orca's tiresome 1.3g field. Rachel closed her eyes to stop her crying. No longer able to see the circle of light, Rachel pictured her team as she last saw them, heads together, excitedly finding signs of life in sea water. She smelled Nina's perfume mixed with the men's impatient sweat. No one looked up at her, and she did not bother to say good-bye, being off-duty, absolutely free until the morning watch. Only the morning watch never came. The missile hit at 3:03 AM shiptime, three-quarters of the way through the midwatch. Technically she was still off-duty—taking it easy.

Another jarring wail filled the dying ship, rising to a singing scream. She inched faster. Her eyes flipped open. This whole section was collapsing. In seconds black sea water would shoot up the shaft, crushing her against the bulkhead above. Frantically, she forced herself upward, struggling to get to that circle of light. Great moaning groans shook the shaft she was in. Damage Control gave a cheerful warning—ATTENTION, PLEASE. LOSS OF PRESSURIZATION IMMINENT.

She heard a hideous bang beneath her, followed by a howling roar. Sea coming in! Pressure stabbed at her eardrums, forcing her to scream, as she pushed upward with all her might, leaving skin on the no-slip surfaces. Tumbling through the lock entrance, Rachel shouted for the inner door to shut. As the door shot closed behind her, she heard the roaring torrent filling the shaft—so much for getting to the aft escape compartment. It looked like she would never leave this airlock.

Curled in fetal position on the floor of the lock—actually on the forward bulkhead, which was now the floor—Rachel took big grateful breaths of recycled air, shaking with relief. Here she had light, air, emergency rations, vacuum suits, adhesive boots, impact harnesses, zero-g sanitary units, reactionless repair kits. None of it all that helpful at the moment—except maybe the sanitary units, since she was about to barf.

Sandwiched between the main cargo hold and the deck above, the lock was a self-contained pressure chamber that could be removed for maintenance or replacement without marring *Earhart*'s structural integrity. Modular construction was a must for survey ships operating light years from a dockyard, and half the *Earhart* could be replaced or jettisoned. Below her, the main hold contained everything from toiletries to a surface-to-orbit cargo lighter—all hopelessly out of reach. But the airlock made a nifty little tomb, where she could sit in shirtsleeve comfort, dining on energy bars and full meal tabs. What a sickening thought. Wracked by fear and guilt, Rachel wondered why she fought so hard to live, when everyone around her was dead. What was the use of clinging to life if it just meant dying alone?

She thought of home, trillions of klicks away. Right "now" the *Nefertiti* was decelerating toward 2992 Eridani, an F-type star with multiple planets over a light year away. Her parents and family were aboard the mother ship, happily expecting a rendezvous with her in Amazon Eridani system, two light years farther on. Only there was no one for *Nefertiti* to rendezvous with, not here anyway. This was to be her Walkabout, her time away from home. Until now she had never left *Nefertiti* for more

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than a few days, and had never been out of talking range of her family. Now they were speeding away at near light speed.

Frightful groans rattled the lock. Rachel rose to her knees, wiping spit from her mouth with the back of her hand, listening silently, tasting blood in her mouth. She had bitten through her lip in fear. Hearing a gigantic ripping, she pictured the ship breaking up around her. Good riddance.

Suddenly she saw that was it! Break-up was her best chance to free the airlock from this sinking ship—so let her rip. Sitting bolt upright, Rachel consulted the screen on her wrist, hurriedly scanning through deck plans, shaking so hard she had to use both hands to steady the tiny blue image. Half of *Earhart* was made to be jettisoned in an emergency, for which this surely qualified—if she could get the ship to split apart at her seams, the self-contained lock should pop free and float to the surface. If it did not, she was no worse off. Strapping herself into an impact harness, she raised her wrist to her lips, ordering what remained of the *Amelia Earhart* to tear herself apart. Damage Control cheerfully obeyed.

Explosive bolts banged around her. *Earhart* shrieked like a living thing, screaming in agony as she flew in different directions. Flooded sections fell away toward Orca's deep drowned surface. Pressurized parts like the main cargo hold burst free, headed upward.

Sea water rushed in to complete the destruction smashing through inner bulkheads and empty corridors. Still attached to the flooded sections, the lock started to descend. Rachel watched the outside pressure mount to 23 atmospheres, then 24, 25, 26, 27. . . .

When she had fallen far enough to be free of large debris, Rachel blew the last bolts holding the lock in place—those connecting her to the sinking section.

But the lock continued to descend. Pressure outside passed 30 atmospheres. Then 40. Then 50.

Impossible. She had blown all the bolts. She quizzed memory, searching for some connection she'd overlooked. Nothing. The lock should have popped free. Instead pressure numbers kept mounting on the screen. Sixty, 70, 80 atmospheres external pressure. The lock was good for up to 200 atmospheres. Until now that seemed impossibly far off.

Rachel shook her wrist, trying to get the pressure numbers to obey. No good. Ninety, 100. . . .

Over a hundred atmospheres of pressure. Somehow the lock had failed to separate, and was caught on the sinking section. This time she was going all the way down, and blowing away every buoyant ship section no longer seemed so brilliant. Fear clamped back down on her ribs, stopping her breath as she stared in helpless terror at the screen. Outside pressure approached the lock's limit of 200 atmospheres. One hundred and forty, 150, 160. . . .

Now Rachel knew just when she would die; she could even see the last seconds ticking down. Friendly voices advised her, LOSS OF PRESSURIZATION IMMINENT—suggesting she return to surface. Instead she braced herself, eyes closed, saying good-bye to her parents, preparing to be flattened.

At 180 atmospheres there was a sudden jerk, followed by another mad

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screech. Rachel was slammed into the impact harness as the lock tumbled and took off, headed topside.

Whatever held her to the sinking hull section could not stand up to 180 atmospheres. She was free, shooting up toward the surface. The inner door was now "down." Outside pressure dropped dramatically, 80, 60, 40 atmospheres. Rachel did not need pressure numbers to know she was headed for the surface, feeling the g-forces as the lock plowed up through dark layers of ocean.

At 5 atmospheres—Orca surface pressure—the lock burst out into the toxic atmosphere, then came splashing down again. Bobbing back and forth, the lock's oscillations slowed to the gentle heave of an ocean swell. She had reached the sea surface.

Nauseated, unable to stand, she undid her impact harness and slumped to the deck, struggling out of her sweaty soiled ship's coveralls. Wadding them into a disposal bag, she sealed it shut. Having the shit scared out of her was no longer a figure of speech. She sat atop the inner door, wearing nothing but an undershirt and a sick look, still unable to stand, but finally able to cry, completely and hopelessly, without fear of some fresh catastrophe interfering. Faces passed before her eyes, first her team—Nina, Carlos, Joel, and Ali. Then the rest of the crew, many of whom she'd known since childhood. All gone forever, leaving her alone. Huge racking sobs heaved up from deep inside her, until Rachel had cried herself out, finishing off by vomiting down the front of her undershirt.

Until now her life expectancy had been measured in seconds; now it stretched ahead of Rachel as long as she cared to make it. The airlock could keep her alive for months, years even. Now she could slit her throat and make it a meaningful act. Not that she would. Too grossly violent, and utterly unnecessary; all she need do was open the lock's outer door and methane-ammonia atmosphere would smother her nicely. Living would be a lot harder.

Rachel pushed wet tangled hair from her face, staring up at the outer door. Any hope lay up there, beyond Orca's towering atmosphere. Somehow she had to contact other survivors of her expedition. If there were none, then she had to get back to civilization alone—which would require a gravity drive starship. Rachel guessed there were possibly five gravity drive starships within a light year or so of where she sat. The nearest was the *Amelia Earhart*—now in pieces, and unlikely to do her much good. Next there was the starship that had destroyed *Earhart*. This was more speculative. Whoever fired that missile probably came in a starship, since Tigris system was unexplored and uninhabited. But her chances of hitching a ride home with whoever destroyed *Earhart* seemed pretty thin.

Her best hope was *Tereshkova,* the expedition's other survey ship, twenty light minutes away downsystem, orbiting Ishtar, Tigris Eridani A II. Her distress call would not reach *Tereshkova* for another 2.3 minutes, so they might be blissfully unaware of any danger; but Rachel doubted it, having heard nothing from *Tereshkova* since the missile hit—no normal traffic, no position reports, no telemetry, no chit-chat. Total systems crash. Whoever destroyed *Earhart* probably hit *Tereshkova* first—but she had to know for sure.

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The two remaining ships were even fainter hopes. Light cruiser *Sirocco,* the expedition's naval support, was accelerating away from the neighboring star, Tigris Eridani B, two light months away—headed for the rendezvous with *Nefertiti* in Amazon Eridani. It would take months for her signal to catch up, and neither *Sirocco* nor *Nefertiti* were likely to hear her distress call amid the radiation storm at relativistic speeds. The nearest inhabited system, fifty light years away, would get her signal when she was in her sixties, and could not reply until she was well over a hundred—leaving her very much on her own.

She stripped off her vomit-soaked undershirt, stuffed it into the disposal bag, then washed as best she could, and struggled into a clean set of ship's coveralls. First she had to see what she had to work with, which meant ruining her comfy shirtsleeve environment. Selecting a vacuum suit, she suited-up, setting it for five atmospheres. Then she opened the valve on the outer door. Methane and ammonia streamed in, combining with lock oxygen to make an explosive mixture—now the slightest spark would blast her prematurely into orbit. When pressure equalized, she ordered the outer door to open, then stuck her head out.

Designed to float door-up, the lock bobbed in a vast heaving planet-wide sea. Long blue-black rollers surged slowly toward her, laced with streaks of foam, lifting the lock up, then dropping it down. Orca had a surface area a hundred times that of Earth, and all of it was water. An incredible sight, especially for someone born aboard a starship.

Liquid water clouds stretched toward the far off horizon, great gray swirls shot with shafts of light, dragging black streamers of rain over the sea surface toward her. Above the clouds, Orca's huge atmosphere reached up to the edge of space. This was what brought *Earhart* to Orca. Liquid water at earth normal temperatures, under tolerable pressure and surface gravity. Automatic probes indicated the possibility of life, and her team had found it, tiny anaerobic organisms able to metabolize methane. For that someone had killed them? Totally insane. But dwelling on the totality of her situation, with all its whys and wherefores, would surely drive her mad.

She flipped the suit macroscope down over her eyes, scanning the sea surface. Half a klick away, a shiny object bobbed in the waves. Kicking up the gain, she spotted a section of pressurized hull. Nice, but not too useful. Four klicks farther off, Rachel found what she was looking for—*Amelia Earhart*'s main cargo hold, floating door-side up.

Dropping back into the lock, she strapped on a VTOL belt and stepped into adhesive boots; then she took off, flying out through the open door into Orca's thick poisonous atmosphere. Shiny bits of *Earhart* dotted the dark heaving sea. Landing on the slick half-submerged cargo hold, she told her boots to grip, then walked warily over to the entrance lock, and cycled through. Back in a shirtsleeve environment, she stripped off her v-suit. Designed to float right-side-up, the hold looked wonderfully intact, with lights on and air circulating, and jammed with enough equipment to found a small colony—too bad she could not take it with her. She climbed into the cramped cockpit of the surface-to-orbit cargo lighter, ordering up a systems check. The autopilot blinked back, "ALL SYSTEMS GREEN."

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"Good." Settling into the crash webbing, she ordered a sweep for electronic emissions or unusual objects in near orbit.

"NO EMISSIONS, NO OBJECTS."

Nothing, just the usual moons and moonlets. Night was coming on fast, thanks to Orca's quick nine-hour rotation. Assuming the attack came from somewhere down sun, dark would be the best time to lift off, with Orca's bulk hiding her from the inner system. She told the autopilot to go into tactical mode, and watched a smartlift raid the hold's arsenal and food stocks, loading the cargo lighter with Hellhounds, Osiris missiles, and two years' worth of emergency rations—just in case.

"Nice job," she complimented the cargo lighter. "Too bad you don't have the legs to take me outsystem." Somehow she had to trade this friendly, obedient packing case for a deep space vessel. Which meant seeing what shape *Tereshkova* was in, without getting killed doing it. As Tigris Eridani A sank below the invisible horizon, Rachel unsealed the cargo door and told the autopilot to take her to Jonah, Orca's icy innermost moon.

Jonah had to be the loneliest place in creation, a pitted iceball a thousand klicks across, a frozen airless waste perfect for her needs. She landed the cargo lighter in a deep ice crevasse on the Orca-facing side, totally invisible from downsun. Here Orca cut off half the sky, a great bluish-black ball permanently embedded in the short horizon. Putting on her v-suit, she flew to an ice pinnacle near the terminator, a giant iceberg caught in a huge frozen rill that had stopped flowing billions of years ago. There she settled down to watch Tigris Eridani A rise over Orca's shadowy cloud tops.

Shadows shrank as the terminator moved toward her over the cratered ice field. Then suddenly, the system's small yellow sun emerged from behind the dark limb of the planet. Through her macroscope she spotted Ishtar, a gleaming white ball on the far side of Tigris A, the veiled goddess of love and war. Beside it hung the little brownish moon, Enkidu. In elliptical orbit around them both was a shining silver streak. Bingo. She kicked up the gain—it was a ship, lying derelict, but intact. That had to be *Tereshkova*.

But how to get to it? She told the autopilot to get back into tactical mode and give options. The answer came back, "TEST DOWNSUN DEFENSES." She agreed, and one of the Hellhounds took off to make a high-g pass at *Tereshkova*. Lying down to await results, Rachel fell instantly into a deep well-deserved sleep—since by now it was late in the morning watch, on a day that began with the midwatch from hell.

Hours later the autopilot woke her, and she flipped on the macroscope. Missiles had emerged from behind the little brownish moon—two of them. Her Hellhound shot off decoys on a dozen trajectories. Four more missiles emerged from Enkidu. Which seemed like a stilted, automated response. Rachel watched the missiles hit. One got the Hellhound, the others took out decoys, while the surviving decoys sailed on, continuing to accelerate downsun. She asked for analysis, and the autopilot replied, "SIMPLE AUTOMATED DEFENSES—OVERWHELM WITH MULTIPLE MISSILES."

Sensing contempt in the terse machine reply, she told the autopilot, "Do

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your worst." Three Hellhounds and an Osiris took off, and she lay back down to sleep some more. By now it was the noon watch, and though she took a full meal tab, she could not sleep. Memories crowded in, along with horror and loneliness, keeping her awake atop her desolate icy peak. She had tablets in her helmet that would easily knock her out, but Rachel fought to keep chemical dependency to a minimum, sucking water and glucose instead while staring out at the crystalline waste.

Every so often she flipped on the macroscope, checking for missiles. Finally they came, four of them, then four more as the Hellhounds fired decoys—all coming from the same spot on Enkidu. Rachel watched in fascination as the missiles spread, trying to cover dozens of decoys. They completely missed the Osiris orbit-to-surface missile, which slammed into their calculated point of origin, its anti-matter warhead blowing a huge hole in Enkidu.

Her heart leaped. That was for *Earhart*. And Nina, and Joel, and Ali. And all the others. Rachel felt a primitive surge of satisfaction, seeing the eruption of dust from the missile impact. Vengeance is sweet, especially from a billion kicks away, against a faceless foe.

Triumph was fleeting. She had beaten some murderous micro-brained system, built for waylaying innocents but unable to survive sustained attacks. So long as she stayed stranded in this dead end system, she could not even count it a win. She took off in the cargo lighter, heading downsun, missiles prowling ahead of her—just in case. High-g missiles hit the inner system in hours, but the cargo lighter took days. Time dragged. She set up housekeeping in the hold amid the spare Hellhounds, a primitive existence with no 3V to hide the bulkheads, no virtual entertainment, and no human contact, nothing but preserved meals and an aching sense of loss. Until now she had been enveloped by family and shipmates—born in a starship crèche, raised and schooled aboard ship. Since her parents were interstellar explorers, she had to be one too—only she never expected to be doing it alone.

As Tigris A grew in the view screens, no new missiles streaked up to greet her—an encouraging sign. Whatever destroyed *Earhart* and knocked out *Tereshkova* was gone. Would she ever know what it was? Maybe, but her main concern was *Tereshkova,* and whether the wrecked starship contained any survivors, or could somehow take her home. Finding out who had failed to kill her could wait.

But it soon became clear that the derelict in an eccentric orbit was not *Tereshkova*. Rachel stared dumbfounded at the magnified image, recognizing the battered outlines of an old-fashioned naval corvette, ripped open by a direct hit. Gutted, singed, and broken, the hull was orbited by a halo of ice and debris. Also by bodies, some of them human, floating against the sea of stars. There was no sign whatever of *Tereshkova,* or any other remnants of Rachel's expedition.

Downcast, she matched orbits with the derelict, suiting up and flying over to see what she could find. Not much. The wreck was a total write-off, those parts that were not destroyed being too old and obsolete to salvage. *Draco* was stenciled on the forward hull, matching dragon tattoos on human members of the crew. Rachel had imagined she might remove

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the warship's interstellar drive, and somehow fit it to the cargo lighter, but the missile had hit smack in the engine room. The only part of the corvette still fully operational was a silver hibernation capsule orbiting amid the bodies.

She towed the shining coffin-sized capsule back to the ship. At worst she could use it to wait out the century or so it would take for help to arrive, assuming whomever was inside did not mind. What was an ancient warship doing in an otherwise empty system? The corvette herself was centuries old, so old there was no record of any such loss in this sector—but the actual wreck was much more recent. Frozen gases from the ruptured hull had not fully dissipated, and the hibernation capsule had been sealed for nine months, twenty-eight days, twelve hours, and fifty-two minutes, according to the readout. Whoever was inside was also the sole survivor of the catastrophe, but she was not anxious to unseal the box and swap stories.

Stowing the cold sleep capsule in the hold, she took a look-in at Enkidu, easily spotting where the Osiris hit. Antimatter warheads leave big holes, but this one was wildly different. Expecting a crater, she instead saw a break in the skin of the moon. Enkidu was not made out of rock or ice, but constructed from some sort of solid foam, brown on the outside and pink within, held together by a web of metal reinforcers. She asked the autopilot what to make of it, and the answer came back, "ALIEN ARTIFACT."

No shit—but who would build a moon-sized space station in a system inhabited by anaerobic bacteria? Rachel had no ready answer. There were no star-traveling aliens living in Human Space, unless you counted the Bugs, and Bugs never built anything like this. Whoever put together Enkidu was someone totally new to Rachel—and she was a xenobiology cadet, whose whole life had been spent exploring this sector, the very sort of person who should know. She quizzed the autopilot, "What do I do next?"

"INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION."

Too true. She had seen no trace of *Tereshkova,* which should have been peacefully exploring Ishtar, the cloud shrouded earth-type planet that brought them to Tigris Eridani A system in the first place. If *Tereshkova* were hit while surveying the planet, it might have spiraled in, burning up in Ishtar's thick atmosphere. Rachel would be lucky to find any of the pieces.

Which left her with only one thing to do. Going to the arms cabinet, Rachel withdrew a stinger, then unsealed the hibernation capsule, delicately lifting the silver lid. Inside was a SuperCat, curled and sleeping, attached by tubes to the box. SuperCats, *Homo Smilodon,* were two-meter tall bioconstructs with tawny fur, bred centuries ago from human and big cat DNA—basically humanoid aside from the claws, fur, little bobbed tails, cat faces, cat attitudes, and of course the two big upper canines curving down past the chin. Rachel poked the sleeping cat with the barrel of her stinger, then stepped back.

Slowly the SuperCat unwound, sitting up in his silver box, muscles rippling beneath his soft short fur. His cat's eyes focused on her, and his grin revealed twin rows of white teeth. "Hello, Human."

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Rachel nodded, noting that the tubes kept the big naked cat attached to the box. Good, because SuperCats could be blindingly fast. If the bioconstruct got close to her, he could take her stinger away, and do whatever he wanted. "Hello, yourself."

"Not what you expected, am I?" His grin widened, "You are equally a surprise to me. What year is this?"

"I will ask the questions," Rachel informed him, keeping the stinger pointed at the SuperCat. "Are you a slaver?"

"Slaver?" He seemed to find the question ludicrous. "I am not human. What would I want slaves for?"

Late night snacks? She thought it but did not say it, concentrating on the evidence against the SuperCat. "You came off that corvette—an unregistered warship deep in the Eridani, named the *Draco*." Dragon tattoos and dragon names were slaver trademarks.

"And you?" The saber-toothed bioconstruct managed to look indignant. "How did you get here? What ship is this?" He looked around the hold with its stock of spare Hellhounds.

She shook her head, unimpressed by pleas of innocence—if there were slavers insystem, then *Amelia Earhart* and *Tereshkova* must have been their intended victims. There was nothing else insystem to attract them. "Just tell me what I want to know, or this is the last ship you will ever see."

He rolled his eyes at human hospitality. "You must be female."

"Afraid so," Rachel replied evenly. Neither slavers nor SuperCats got on well with women. "What do you know about this alien artifact?"

"What artifact?" Again that air of aggrieved innocence.

"Enkidu." The moon-sized construct they were currently orbiting. "Who put it here? And why?"

"Ask the xenos who built it," the SuperCat suggested.

"You get one last chance to be useful," Rachel explained. "Unless you start telling me things I do not know, you are going back into orbit, minus that cold sleep capsule." She had use for the hibernation chamber.

Nostrils flaring, the SuperCat looked her over. "Do you know you smell of fear?"

"Really?" She could feel her sweat collecting on the stinger's grip. "I had not noticed."

"You are only human," he consoled her.

Ignoring the condescension, she asked, "And who are you?"

"Humans like to call me Tigger." He tried to sound like a friend to all mankind.

"Okay, Tigger," she nodded slowly, keeping the stringer steady as she could, "tell me about this alien artifact."

"Curiously enough, it is a speed-of-light gate," the SuperCat explained, smiling at her surprise, "built by the Unknown Xenos more than a billion years ago—presumably the same ones that carved Whispering Rock on Epsilon Eridani III. And not just this gate either, there are others, a whole network connecting Tigris Eridani to the surrounding systems—though the xenos themselves are long gone."

"Gone where?" she wondered aloud, not expecting an answer. "And why?"

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"Perhaps they did not like the neighbors?" the SuperCat purred. "Many get on my nerves."

Speed-of-light-gates. Fascinating, and physically possible. Maybe even the answer to her prayers, if this toothy killer told the truth—unlikely as that seemed. But stranger things had happened this deep in the Eridani. "How does the gate work?" she asked, hoping it could get her to Amazon E.

Tigger shrugged. "You have to ask the Unknown Xenos."

Fair enough. "Then where does it lead to?"

Tigger smiled slyly, showing his teeth. "Where do you want to go?"

"Amazon Eridani." If she could get there at the speed of light, she might even arrive ahead of *Sirocco* and *Nefertiti*.

"Could be done." Tigger did not make it sound easy.

She studied the bioconstruct. Tigger was inherently untrustworthy, being both a slaver and a SuperCat, and could easily be spinning her along until he could turn the tables. Unknown Xenos. Mysterious speed-of-light gates. All of it fairly unbelievable—but she had to believe some of it. Either that, or crawl into the hibernation capsule and hope for rescue in a hundred years. She was not tempted to trust Tigger with her troubles, since any information she gave him would be gleefully used against her. Instead she had to pump him for details, without giving up anything, starting with, "Who booby-trapped this gate?" That automated missile defense was not the work of billion-year-old xenos. Old and obsolete for sure, but human built. "Who deployed the robo-missiles that gutted your ship?"

Tigger shrugged, showing scant concern for his lost shipmates. "Greenies did that."

Figures. First slavers and SuperCats, then Unknown Xenos, and now more bioconstructs. "What Greenies?"

Tigger dismissed her concern. "You shall see."

"No good," she shook her head, "I must know now."

Tigger yawned at having to repeat himself. "Greenies did it, probably from Marduk in the B-system, to harass anyone using the speed-of-light gate."

"Purely out of spite, I suppose?" Or to keep out unwanted SuperCats. Marduk was supposed to be uninhabited, but it appeared that Greenies had moved into the B-system.

"Pure spite and malice," Tigger purred in agreement. "Greenies are ungrateful oafs, fanatically short-sighted and anti-social. The worst human traits carefully culled together, then cross-bred to a cabbage."

Walkabout

9:47:13 AM, Enkidu

I have to go in. Enkidu may or may not contain a speed-of-light gate—built by Unknown Xenos—but I must at least take a look. It might be my only chance to make rendezvous with *Nefertiti,* or just a ruse by Tigger to

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trip me up. Being both a slaver and a SuperCat, he is inherently untrustworthy—which is why he stays in the box. . . .

Rachel stood in her v-suit on the airless brown surface of Enkidu, held down by sticky boots, and backlit by unnamed constellations in the Far Eridani. Floating above and behind her was the sealed hibernation chamber, strapped to a grav-sled and tethered to her waist, with Tigger inside, fast asleep. At her booted feet was the entrance to Enkidu, a smooth purple patch on the dimpled brown surface of the artificial moon. Kneeling, Rachel ran her gloved hand over the slick purple door. Fingertip sensors registered the hum of power, and room temperature warmth. Tigger had promised earth-normal conditions within, slavers having long ago reconditioned the gates for human use. Saying a mental good-bye to the stars, she whispered into her recorder:

Wish me luck, I am going in. . . .

She tapped a signal in the simple binary code controlling the gates—hard, soft, hard, soft, soft, hard. Sliding sideways, the purple door opened on a smooth sloping tunnel. No slavers leaped out to seize her—a good sign. Rachel stepped cautiously inside, dragging Tigger's box behind her. Pale yellow light shone at the end of the tunnel. She turned and tapped the wall—soft, soft, hard—closing the door behind her. Tigger taught her the code under duress, but it worked perfectly.

As she towed Tigger's floating box toward the yellowish patch of light, the downward sloping tunnel slowly filled with air, like an open-ended airlock—a billion-year-old technology that was better than human. Encouraging. If the door worked so well there might really be a star gate inside. Her suit said air quality was good, warm and well oxygenated, with low humidity and zero pollutants. Unsealing her suit, she tried the breath test. Hot, clean, and bone dry.

When she got to the yellow patch Rachel saw why—it was desert air. She stepped from the tunnel into the full glare of a white-hot noon sun, reflecting off shimmering yellow sand stretching into hazy blue distance. Suit air-conditioning kicked in, bathing her body in moist recycled air. Enkidu's shining white inner sun was not red-orange Tigirs Eridani A, but more like Sol, the yellow home sun Rachel had only seen in 3V. Which figured, since this had to be 3V too. Rachel had already seen the inside of Enkidu—it was all pink foam and metal webbing, with no inner white sun and endless desert. This was all done with virtual effects, from the glaring hologram sky to the fine warm sand that slid between Rachel's bare fingers.

Footprints in the soft powdery sand led away from the tunnel, aimed at the pale blue horizon—someone in non-slip boots had been here before her. Rachel had no choice but to follow the bootprints, setting off over wind-rippled dunes, towing Tigger behind her. Somewhere ahead lay the speed-of-light gate that would take her to Amazon Eridani—or so the SuperCat said.

* * *

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11:03:27 PM, Day 2, Enkidu
This is absurd. In a day and a half I have walked over a hundred klicks across virtual desert. Still I cannot sleep. Every so often the sand gives way to hard flat claypan, or pebbled plain—but each time the footprints just reappear on the farside, as clear and crisp as fifty klicks ago. Making the march even more of a farce.

I could turn around and follow my footsteps back—but why? There is nothing behind me but an empty system, and two or three wrecked ships. And somewhere ahead there is an end to all this sand, or so I hope. One more klick and I could be there. . . .

Rachel awoke to the humming of her suit, and the cool flow of air-conditioning, realizing she had passed out in the shadow of the grav-sled, head resting on the warm sand. Sitting up, she wiped powdery sand off her wet cheek, then sucked water from her suit, studying the saffron swells. Hot holospace extended in all directions, but the distance was deceptive—if there was a gate, it was somewhere near at hand. Fear, loss, and loneliness welled up. Anger too, tempting her to open up the hibernation chamber and beat the truth out of Tigger—if only he were not so big. Instead she set out again, hauling Tigger behind her, sand dragging at her feet. Slogging along, she recalled long ago incidents in vivid detail, picturing places she had been, some real, some 3V. Children aboard the *Nefertiti* had their own virtual Neverland that adults could not access except in emergencies, a child's kingdom full of fairy tale fantasy and structured, educational adventure. She rehashed bygone issues with dead friends, recalling childhood scenes with Carlos and Nina, who had been royalty in Neverland, a lord and princess—Rachel had been a forest sprite. She remembered how thrilling it felt when Joel kissed her at planetfall.

12:42:09 AM, Day 5, Enkidu
This is getting nowhere, literally. Good as this simulation is, I've seen better. Though the desert scenery changes, the ground beneath my boots stays monotonously the same, rolling dunes, gritty flats, and claypan. Yesterday, I saw the same pinkish pebble for the third time in two days. Second time I saw it, I put a notch in the pebble to mark it. That notch is still there—making me feel like a mouse on a Möbius strip, vainly seeking the end. Or one of our pet hamsters, with little slide walks in their terrarium, to let them run and think they were getting somewhere.

Time to take two pills and a meal tab, get some sleep, then find some way out of this sand box. . . .

She had to start by opening Tigger's box. When she felt rested and refreshed, and ready to tackle the SuperCat, Rachel got out the stinger, telling the cold sleep capsule to open. Tigger sat up, yawned, then grinned behind his big saber-teeth, saying, "Hey human, how's it going?"

"Good enough," Rachel replied evenly, keeping the stinger pointed at his furry chest.

"But you are not getting anywhere, I see." Tigger looked happily about. "You know this is only a holding area. . . ."

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She cut him off. "Tell me how to get out."

"Sorry human, cannot do that." His toothy grin widened. "But I can show you."

Rachel shook her head grimly, "Tell me, or else."

"So shoot me." Tigger shrugged, still smiling. "You will learn even less from me dead. And you will be stuck here—even a *Homo sapien* would hardly be that stupid."

He had her. If this was a virtual holding area, she had small chance of even finding the original entrance. Rachel was reminded of those specimen traps that were ridiculously easy to enter, but impossible to escape. She had walked straight in, a sample *Homo sapien* in a billion-year-old trap. "Okay," she told the SuperCat, "you can get out, if you take me straight to the speed-of-light gate—ASAP."

Happily stripping off tubes and connections, Tigger climbed out of the box, yawning and stretching like a house cat in the sun, flexing his fingers to extend and retract his claw-like nails. White light from the false sun shone on his six-inch upper canines. "Make one suspicious move," Rachel warned, "and I swear I will shoot."

Tigger smiled amiably. "Anything you say, babe."

"I am not a babe." A nagging voice in her head said she would one day be very sorry she did not shoot him now. "I am also not a honey, doll, cutie, chick, bird, bunny, cow, or filly, nor any other form of infant or prey species."

"But you are female?" Tigger arched an eyebrow. "I merely tried to be pleasantly familiar."

"Don't. We are not friends." That is why she had the stinger. "We are not going to be familiar."

"Specieist," Tigger snarled good-naturedly, pleased to show his superiority—he did not mind having a human tagging along. "So what must I call you?"

"Human will have to do." Rachel kept the stinger locked on him, not giving an angstrom—no SuperCat slaver cared for her, except as potential prey, making it dangerous even to give her name. Bad enough she had to let the cat out of the box, to let him get familiar would be fatal. "Now show me the gate."

Tigger set off swiftly and surely, walking upright, perpendicular to the line of bootprints Rachel had followed, striding across unbroken sand toward a far off ridgeline. She followed at a careful distance, still dragging the grav-sled. Her fire-and-forget stinger could hit moving targets she could not even see—what she feared was having Tigger get too close. He easily had three times her strength, and reflexes quick as a cat's and twice as sure.

Before they even reached the ridgeline the land sloped down, and she saw a green oasis nestled in a sandy depression, giant horse-tails and tree-ferns looking down on a crystal pool—the first sign of life since entering Enkidu. Amazed by the wet mirage, Rachel asked, "How did you know where this was?"

"Been here before," replied the smug SuperCat.

"So where is the gate itself?" As soon as he pointed it out, Tigger was going back in his box.

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"Underwater." Tigger nodded toward the pool. "We have to get into v-suits to get to it."

Rachel shook her head. "I will get in a v-suit. You just tell me how to work the gate." His sleep chamber worked just fine underwater.

"Will never do," Tigger told her, smiling at human simplicity. "These gates are guarded. Greenies set a whole host of traps—which only I can avoid."

"Why would they do that?" It sounded like an good excuse to stay out of the box.

Tigger professed ignorance. "Greenies are an unfriendly, troublesome lot, whose behavior always astounds me."

While SuperCats were friends to all. Greenies were most likely afraid of slavers, and had set up the automated defenses that destroyed *Earhart* and *Draco,* and probably *Tereshkova*. And there were bound to be similar traps ahead, but Tigger seemed supremely confident that he could overcome them. Why not let him lead for a while? Then he could go back in the cat box. "Just remember, this stinger stays locked on you."

"How could I forget?" Tigger cheerfully removed a SuperCat v-suit from the sleep chamber's storage compartment, pulling it on and sealing the helmet. Rachel sealed her own helmet, watching him walk straight into the pool, disappearing into clear depths. Rachel followed, feeling the water's cool resistance—the grav-sled slid in after her. Seeing Tigger's silver suit ahead, she set out after it, her sticky boots keeping her from floating away.

Rachel passed the first gate without realizing it. Suddenly the pool got deeper, and darker around her. So dark her suit headlights came on, as did Tigger's. Shining bubbles rose in lazy driblets from his suit's recycler. She told the grav-sled to turn on its lights, illuminating a sea bottom floored with basalt, and dotted by tall spires of twisted rock. No longer in some oasis pond, she asked over the comnet, "Where are we?"

"Tigris Eridani B system," Tigger replied easily. "Inside a moon named Apsu, orbiting the planet Marduk. Apsu is actually an artifact like Enkidu, built to hold the interstellar gate—the Unknown Xenos orbited their long distance gates around likely looking planets, then used local gates to get about. Come, the next one is not far."

Not far? If Tigger was telling the truth, they had gone from Tigris Eridani A to the B system, light-days away. The two stars were distant binaries, twin K-type stars revolving around each other in long slow orbits that took millennia—yet they had stepped from one system to the next so easily Rachel barely noticed the transition. Checking her suit's chronometer, she saw it agreed. Tuned to neutrino pulses from the Home Systems, her suit claimed days had passed, and she was now in T-Eridani B. "This is another artificial satellite like Enkidu?"

"Just like it," Tigger assured her, "until Greenies flooded it to make it harder to use." Drowning the interior, but not damaging the mechanism. These Unknown Xenos had been tremendous builders, putting moons in orbit, and zipping about effortlessly at the speed of light. What had brought them down? Rachel could not guess—a lot happens in a billion years. Tigger led her to a submerged circle of tall inverted trapezoids sup-

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porting a greenish dome. The area under the dome was dry—without any lock, walls, or explanation—water just did not go there. Tigger unsealed his helmet, saying, "This is the next gate, opening onto the surface of Marduk. Air there is breathable, and the temperature mild, but there will be Greenies."

Rachel nodded, taking it all in, but keeping the stinger aimed at Tigger—not trusting him one micron more, even after going billions of klicks together. He smiled at her seriousness, saying, "We are friends, remember? You hardly need that weapon."

"I think I do," Rachel replied evenly. "And we are not friends."

"As you wish." Tigger politely overlooked her hostility. "But the gravsled will not go through these local gates, which are much too small. So we must abandon it here, taking just the essentials, food, water, medikits, night glasses, battle armor if you have it, any flares you can find, some decent cutting tools, and a pair of aerial escape packs or parachutes. . . ."

"Parachutes?" They were on a sea bottom.

"Trust me." His toothy smile widened. "We will need them."

"Will VTOL belts do?" She had two, to go with the v-suits.

"Even better!" Tigger could not hide his surprise at her exceeding expectations.

Strapping on a VTOL belt, Rachel apologized for not bringing battle armor, restoring her image as a bumbling female. "Cannot be helped," the SuperCat purred, "but put on night glasses, and have your flares ready. Set one off as soon as we go through. This gate will let us out on Marduk's night side. Greenies will be watching, but the flare will blind them."

Rachel glumly loaded her pack with Tigger's "essentials"—not liking the way he blandly took charge. But what choice did she have? Up close, in the cramped space under the dome, the SuperCat's size, strength, and inhuman speed scared her. He could take away her stinger anytime—that she still had it meant he wanted her help against the Greenies. Despite the SuperCat's casual bravado, the detested Greenies worried Tigger enough to want her armed assistance, watching his back, and popping the odd flare as needed, leaving his clawed hands free to kill. Tigger was supremely confident she would not shoot him, so long as she needed him to get home. Feeling very female and doormatish, she rummaged through the supplies, unable to shake the feeling she was cooperating with her killer, being the pathetic willing victim. Behind his bullshit *bonhomie,* Tigger firmly believed he was the superior being, and she had no rights worth mentioning. As someone lost in the wilds might make use of a stray dog, then eat the dog if need be, with just a twinge of guilt. To Tigger, she was prey waiting to be taken, too docile to put up a decent fight, but temporarily useful. All she could think to do was to slip a micro-grenade inside her coveralls, a last resort surprise for when Tigger turned on her. Not wanting to kill any Greenies, Rachel set her stinger on SLEEP.

She watched through night-glasses as Tigger tapped lightly on the floor; hard, soft, soft, soft, hard. Transition was so swift she barely had time to pop her flare. One moment Rachel stood on a brightly illuminated sea bottom inside a drowned moon, breathing dank air, but staying miraculously dry; a moment later she was plunged into darkness on the

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nightside of Marduk, standing in the open under dense forest canopy, breathing black air smelling of jasmine. High-pitched squeals of surprise came from the brush around her.

Firing her flare, she bathed the whole scene in a burst of ultrabright light—finding she was not in the open, but in a big stout bamboo cage bound together with rope. Before she could react, Tigger seized her gun hand, and engaged his VTOL belt, shooting them both straight upward. His big SuperCat body hit the top of the cage, lifting it with them. Cage, cat, and Rachel went crashing through tree-ferns and forest canopy, sending a shower of foliage rattling into the darkness below.

Suddenly, they burst free, still in the cage, but flying through the night air supported by tiny gravity drive units in Tigger's VTOL belt. Far off stars shone between the bamboo bars. *Sirocco* had made a sweep through the entire B system—ironically looking for slavers—but totally missing these Greenies, showing the difference between a naval visit and a serious examination by a trained xenobiologist.

With a thump, the cage came to rest on the branched crown of a tall tree-like lycopod. Rachel landed in a heap on the tatami bottom of the cage, with Tigger nearly on top of her. Staring up through the bars, dazed and bruised, but seemingly unbroken, she flipped on her night goggles. Tigger sat up, rubbing his shoulder, but otherwise pleased with himself, giving the cage a speculative kick, "This is one of those Greenie traps I mentioned. What cutting tools did you bring?"

"You might have given me more warning," she whispered, glad just to be breathing the jasmine-scented air. She had lost her stinger in the crash, but that hardly seemed to matter.

Tigger searched through her pack, coming up with a laser-cutter, and handing her stinger back to her. "Here is your weapon, please be careful with it. And try not to aim it at me—at least until we get past these Greenies."

"What Greenies?" So far she had seen no one, merely hearing some high-pitched squeals.

"These Greenies." Tigger pointed the laser-cutter at sparks of light rising from the black hole they put in the forest canopy. Like giant fireflies the lights whirled up into the night air, then spread out over the canopy, clearly searching for them. Attacking the cage with the laser-cutter, Tigger slashed a hole in the bars on the side away from the Greenies. Then he stuck the laser-cutter into his VTOL belt, saying, "Shall we go?"

"How far to the next gate?" she asked, holstering her stinger. Silly to keep aiming it at him if she could not bring herself to press the trigger.

"Not far." Tigger was in his element, not even wearing night goggles, seeing naturally by starlight, supremely confident that he could handle both her and the Greenies. Maybe she should try talking to the Greenies? According to Tigger they had killed everyone aboard *Earhart* and *Tereshkova*—which she partly believed. Much as she wished to pin those deaths on Tigger, he had been in cold sleep at the time. And the Unknown Xenos had been gone even longer.

That left the Greenies—unless someone else was knocking about this "uninhabited" double system. Greenies were human, sort of, *Photo sapi-*

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ens, bioconstructs with symbiotic photosynthetic algae in their skin and germ cells—plus enough "improvements" over normal humans to make you feel Greenies were a different species. Wilder than Tigger in some ways. Designed illegally ages ago to colonize and terraform distant systems, Greenies had gotten out of control, infesting various parts of the near Beyond. All the traps she had seen so far were typical Greenie work, so why not the missile defense? Heaven knows, Greenies had a lot to defend against. This deep in the Eridani, the only humans were criminals so hot they had fled Human Space, or slavers who enjoyed living beyond the reach of the Peace Corps and Universal Rights. All of them preyed on *Photo sapiens.*

Even if she could convince them she was not "that" sort of human, could the Greenies get her home? Probably not. They had no contact with Human Space, and were more intent on blocking the gates than using them. Better to get past these Greenies, then try to deal with Tigger. Some tall order.

"Keep close," Tigger advised, grabbing her VTOL belt and catapulting both of them through the hole he'd cut in the cage. Foliage lashed and flailed at her, making her glad to have goggles over her eyes—in this light gravity she must weigh nearly nothing to Tigger. Shattering still more layers of canopy, her shoulder took a huge whack, then suddenly she found herself on solid forest floor, being set down by the SuperCat. Tigger told her, "Follow me."

He made a path for her through the undergrowth, not bothering with trails, which were bound to be booby-trapped. Using the laser-cutter on low, Tigger swung it like a machete, slicing through vines, fern fronds, and tall stands of elephant grass, sending foliage flying into the night. She followed on a soft new mown carpet, her goggles making night as bright as noon. By stages the ground rose up beneath her, then at the crest of a low dark ridgeline, Tigger called a halt. He told her, "The next gate is not far off."

"Does this gate lead to Amazon Eridani?" she asked, already tired of flipping from world to world, wonderful as it might be.

Tigger shook his head. "Two more, after this one."

"How come?" She wanted some sketchy assurance that Tigger was not making this all up.

"This gate leads to a Greenie world at the system's edge," Tigger told her. "From there we can go straight to Orm, then I will send you on to Amazon Eridani."

Two more stops between her and Amazon E. An unnamed Greenie world at the system's edge, and "Orm," whatever that was. "What is Orm?"

"Wonderful world." Tigger assured her, "You will love it. Amazingly Greenie free—unlike this world, and the next one. This next gate is controlled by Greenies on both sides, so it is not heavily guarded. But once past it, we must somehow bust through the watched and guarded gate into Orm. After that we are home free."

He was, anyway. Orm sounded like his home world, or maybe just a favorite hideout. Either way, Tigger would be on his home turf, and free to do his worst. So if she somehow got through the next two gates, the real

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crisis could come there—when it was just her and Tigger, and let the best being win. "Sounds great," she lied heartily, though by pretending to agree, she at least got to keep her weapon. "So where is the easy gate?"

"Just downhill from us." Tigger nodded at the dark foliage downslope. "In a geologically stable cave on a cliff face near the base of this ridge. Greenies use it, but any guards will be looking the other way, watching for intruders from offplanet. Come, I'll show you." Tigger led her down a steep cliff-face that quickly turned vertical. Telling her adhesive boots to stick, she walked down the cliff behind the SuperCat, who descended easily ahead of her, totally unbothered by gravity. He stopped just above the black yawning cave, saying, "Stay here, count to three slowly, then follow me."

"Wait," she whispered, settling back against the rockface, supporting herself with one hand and her sticky-boots, leaving one hand free for the stinger.

"What?" Tigger looked back at her, crouched effortlessly above the dark cave mouth, like a sabertooth about to drop on some unwary cave man coming out to piss.

"You cannot kill them," she told him, loosening the stinger in its holster.

"Oh, yes, I can." Tigger dismissed her concern, confidently flexing his claws. "They have no chance."

"No, I mean I will not let you." She drew her stinger, still set on SLEEP.

Tigger laughed softly, "How could you stop me?"

"Maybe I cannot," Rachel admitted, not yet ready to outright defy the SuperCat. "But I will not come with you, if you do."

He snorted at her scruples. "They killed your crew mates—mine too." Tigger added that last as an afterthought, since SuperCats killed to live and eat, not to teach morality. His dead shipmates aboard the *Draco* had to seek their own revenge.

"Possibly," she admitted, feeling like a total wuss, knowing in her heart Greenies had probably killed Nina, Joel, Carlos, and the others. Now she was pleading to save their killers. "But not these particular Greenies," she protested. Reversing her stinger, she offered it to Tigger, saying, "Here, this is set on SLEEP, use it to get us through. If you kill anyone, I will take my chances with the Greenies."

"What a waste." Tigger took the stinger, saying, "With such females, how did humans ever survive, much less spread?"

"Hard to figure," Rachel admitted. "And somehow, we even produced you."

"Just in time." Tigger slid over the edge and into the cave, only slightly encumbered by the stinger—though still making an obvious sacrifice, since his claws and teeth could have done it quicker.

But not nearly so neatly. By the time she reached the cave, the half-dozen Greenies were asleep in little heaps. They were small, massing less than forty kilos apiece, and nearly naked—both nudity and low body mass maximized the advantage of photosynthetic skin. She plucked the stinger's tiny fire-and-forget hornets from their sleeping bodies, night goggles letting her see the little hypodermic wasps plainly, even in an unlit cave at night. Clearly artificial, the cave was a tall circular tube bored straight into solid bedrock well above ground level, accessible through

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handholds carved in the rockface. Or in her case, by walking down the cliff. Tigger was crouched in the back of the cave, waiting patiently for her, stinger in hand. "This is the gate," he told her, "and the far side is unguarded—but check your VTOL belt, and be ready."

"Ready for what?" she asked, hand on her VTOL belt controls, which also hid her microgrenade.

"You'll see." Tigger handed her back the stinger, then reached down and rapped on the gate; two soft, two hard. And the floor disappeared.

She found herself falling through empty air, with nothing beneath her but a fleecy blanket of clouds curving upward into blue haze. Reaching frantically about, Rachel found nothing to hang onto, and ended up batting air. "Quit flapping your arms," Tigger told her, grabbing her flailing wrist. "Do not try to fly unassisted. Aim for the cloud plain, and use your VTOL belt when we get lower. We have taken them unawares."

They were not the only ones. Tigger could have warned her there would be no floor. Rachel recognized the open interior of a habitat, or another artificial moon, with the same sense of virtual distance and the same white-hot hologram sun as in the desert holding area. Distant greenery showed through rents in the clouds, set at odd angles like in a steep cloudy mountain valley. Hidden behind clouds and blue hologram sky was the inner surface of the sphere, covered with green plants to maximize photo-absorption from the fusion-driven sun. Artificial gravity made the spherical surface "down" and the inner sun "up." Putting her arms and legs into swept-back Vs, she dived toward the clouds, cursing the SuperCat for refusing to confide in a lowly human. Half of that was hustle, Tigger trying to steer her through the gates with no time to think. Now the next gate led straight to Tigger's own world. And once on Orm she had to trust Tigger to keep his word—not an appetizing prospect.

"Almost unawares anyway." Tigger pointed at a winged figure upsun from them, also in a stoop, diving with wings swept back, keeping them in sight. Kicking up the gain on her goggles, Rachel saw the Greenie was a girl, naked except for a flying harness and solar-assisted wings, her green skin glistening in pseudo-sunshine.

"Let's try to lose it." Tigger guided her straight into the thickest part of the downsun cloud plain, plunging Rachel in foggy gray wetness, then pulling her up sharply as he engaged his VTOL belt. "Follow me," the SuperCat told her, letting go of her hand, "the next gate is on the far side of the sun."

Engaging her own belt, she stopped falling and started flying, using her goggles to follow Tigger through the fog. Etched in infra-red, the SuperCat stood out sharply against the cold clammy cloud. So did the Greenie, who dove straight through, coming out the far side. Crossing a broad gap in the cloud plain, Rachel saw the Greenie rise up behind them, taking a look upsun, then drop back down to sweep along the base of the clouds, slowly falling behind, but winging in the same direction that they were, shadowing from a safe distance. Some smart Greenie. Despite losing them in the cloud plain, the girl guessed which way they'd gone. And brave too, since the Greenie girl had no chance against Tigger.

Looking ahead, Rachel saw the cloud plain breaking up into puffy

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patches. Thermals off the inner surface raised tall white thunderheads towering over the cottony puffs. Tigger flew swiftly through the patches, but the Greenie cut sunward to keep them in sight. So long as the Greenie guessed where they were going, and kept cutting upsun, Tigger would not shake her.

Looming before them was a floating island, half hidden amid scattered clouds, backed by big menacing thunderheads. Tethered to the surface by a trio of cables, the island was a light collection of flowered balconies and lacy bridgework, enclosing a central gas bag, topped by tall whimsical glass spires and greenhouse towers. Long green tentacles trailed from hanging gardens on its underside, and smaller house-sized aerostats were tied to the main structure by rope ladders. Fliers and skycycles flitted about between the balconies and a sailplane port. Tigger called to her, "This is it. That big aerostat is tethered atop the gate, so the entrance is inside and guarded by Greenies. Who luckily do not know we are coming."

By now she knew that Tigger favored the tiger's tactics, a silent stalk, followed by swift, ferocious attack, overwhelming victims before they got to be opponents. He led her through a thick cloudbank, then doubled back, climbing swiftly upsun, meaning to silence the Greenie following them. This time there could be no arguing with him, since the Greenie girl was a clear threat. If the girl alerted the aerostat, any chance of reaching the gate was gone. And there could be no question of putting her to sleep, or taking her prisoner, not in midair.

Following him into the cloud, Rachel watched through her goggles, seeing Tigger hover for a moment while the Greenie spiraled down to investigate their sudden disappearance. Rachel hovered too, hoping the Greenie would keep her distance, or better yet lose interest—neither seemed likely.

Suddenly Tigger shot upward, going into his leap, aiming to hit the Greenie on the fly and drop her body through the clouds, then tackle the aerostat. Turning up her VTOL belt, Rachel shot after him, breaking out of cloud cover in time to see the Greenie turn aside, spilling air and going into a stoop, desperate to get away from Tigger.

Too late. Unable to flee upsun, or to the aerostat, the Greenie girl had to dive for the deck, in a stern chase Tigger was sure to win. Swiftly closing the gap, the SuperCat had his claws out, needing no weapons to dispose of an unarmed girl half his size. Seeing death plummeting toward her, the Greenie sideslipped frantically, hoping Tigger would overshoot. Looking back over her shoulder, her jade face went wide-eyed with terror as Tigger effortlessly matched her maneuver, coming to a stop in midair between the Greenie and the ground, giving the girl nowhere to go.

Having no alternative herself, Rachel drew her stinger and shot Tigger from behind with a sleep-hornet. Hardly sporting, but it was that or see him rip the helpless girl to pieces.

Tigger went instantly limp, hanging in the sky by his gravity belt, sleeping peacefully for the first time since she let him out of his box back on Enkidu. Thank goodness. Tigger had been like a force of nature, bursting through barriers in time and space, sweeping her along in his wake. Time to take a breather. Hooking her VTOL belt to Tigger's, she headed back toward the aerostat and the gate, flying both belts in tandem.

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Shocked to be alive, the Greenie girl tagged along behind her, still wide-eyed and wary, as small as the Greenies in the cave and entirely naked aside from her wings. As they neared the aerostat, the Greenie got up the nerve to fly closer, asking in quaintly accented Universal, "Is your companion hurt?"

"Just cat napping," Rachel replied, though she hardly thought of Tigger as her "companion." Reaching the aerostat, she found an empty balcony and set Tigger down on light duraluminum decking, turning off their belts. Narrow leafy stairs dripping with green vines led to other parts of the aerostat.

Coming to rest on a rail, with a sheer drop at her back, the Greenie had the fearless grace of someone born in midair. Though child-sized, the Greenie was clearly grown, a woman in miniature, saying softly, "My name is Zoe."

"Rachel," she replied, searching through Tigger's tawny fur for the dart that put the SuperCat to sleep.

Zoe seemed to find her name funny, politely stifling a giggle. Stepping down from the rail, Zoe studied the sleeping SuperCat, saying soberly, "He attacked me."

"That is why I shot him." Rachel removed the spent hornet she had used.

"You shot him?" Zoe shrank back in fear, covering her breasts and putting a hand between her thighs, the first acknowledgment of her nudity. Rachel had not realized Greenies could get embarrassed.

"With this." Rachel held up the tiny heat-seeking hornet.

"Why?" Zoe looked at her with a combination of curiosity and horror, still keeping herself covered.

"So he would not hurt you," Rachel explained. "It is only a sleep dart. He is not harmed, just getting some much-needed rest." Tigger had gone full out since leaving the box.

"Thank you," Zoe nodded meekly, "for saving me from harm. Men are coming, and doubtless you will rather talk to them."

"Why?" They were just starting to get on. Greenie men were cautiously descending the stairs, but Rachel had pinned her hopes on Zoe, who owed her something. "We are talking well enough."

"But they are men," Zoe insisted, flustered that Rachel did not get the point.

"So?" They were indeed men, though none of them came up past her breasts, and while Zoe went naked, the men wore little gold loincloths that showed nicely against green skin.

"Well, you are a man," Zoe whispered shyly. "So you . . ."

"But I am a woman," Rachel protested.

Horror replaced embarrassment, and Zoe shrank back again, saying, "You are female?"

Was it that amazing? She was in ship's coveralls, with her hair cut short, but she was very grown up for seventeen. True she was technically a girl, a legal minor, but that did not make her a man. "Yes, I am female."

"But you are armed," Zoe whispered, as if it were something incredibly indecent. "Can slaver women use weapons?"

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"I am not a slaver," Rachel protested, amazed to be so thoroughly misunderstood.

Stepping warily off the stairs, the men announced in the same accented Universal, "We have come to speak with the slaver."

Zoe told them, "This slaver claims to be female."

"Really?" They too looked taken aback by her alleged femininity. Why was it so hard to believe? Just because she was almost big enough to step on them?

"And I am not a slaver," she added.

"He also claims not to be a slaver," Zoe explained. Men smiled and rolled their eyes, as if that were a rather ridiculous attempt at an insanity defense. Zoe told them, "Take charge of the sleeping cat, since he is male for sure."

"Please, do not harm him," Rachel added anxiously, holstering her stinger. Tigger was still her ticket home.

"Of course," Greenies scoffed at her concern, as if she had begged them not to eat the sleeping bioconstruct. Another sign of how weird she sounded.

"Come," Zoe gestured coyly toward some stairs leading to a lone tower. Mounting the tower stairs, Rachel emerged in a vine-covered cupola, with a sweeping view of the surrounding cloud plain. Closing the trap to the stairs, Zoe latched it shut for privacy, then told her to strip. Now it was Rachel's turn to roll her eyes in protest, but Zoe insisted, unwilling even to talk until this vital question was decided. Of course the spot Zoe picked for "privacy" was an open cupola atop a tower thrust into a sky filled with fliers and sailplanes, but Greenie shamelessness made it curiously easy to slip out of her coveralls and underwear. Zoe did a double-take, sounding roundly shocked, "You are a woman!"

"Afraid so." Rachel pulled back on her coveralls, glad to have gotten that cleared up.

"A slaver female?" Zoe struggled with the concept. "How utterly amazing."

"No." Rachel shook her head. "I am not a slaver."

"Of course you are." This time Zoe was completely sure of herself. "Your skin did not show a spot of green. Do not be ashamed, photosynthesis is not all that much fun. And I have always wanted to meet a slaver woman."

"You have?" A strange ambition for a Greenie growing up behind fortified gates meant to keep *Homo sapiens* out. "Why?"

"We see you on 3V from the Home Systems. The broadcasts themselves are excruciating, but sometimes I turn off the voices and just look at the slavers, to see the big strong handsome men. And the women, so long and tall, like goddesses—giantesses who made us using their own DNA. It is thrilling if you think about it." Deliciously dangerous. Zoe saw absolutely no contradiction between admiring humans at a distance, but blowing them up if they came too close.

"Not all of us are slavers." Rachel kept trying to draw a line between her and Tigger that the Greenies had trouble seeing, since this deep in the Eridani their human forbearers were all thugs and hijackers, intent on killing or enslaving them.

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Zoe asked, "How is that possible? Did you not create us to serve you, to terraform dangerous and distant planets?"

"Not me personally. People bred *Photo sapiens* centuries ago." Illegally too, though it was hardly tactful to call Zoe's creation a crime. "No one still expects you to serve humans."

"Slavers do." Zoe sounded shocked that she could not know something so simple. "That is why they raid our worlds, kidnapping children and young people. That is what the traps are for—you must have seen the traps coming here?"

Rachel asked if such traps included the missile defense in the A system? Zoe admitted they might—but such things were left to men. Rachel strove to explain the difference between people in the Home Systems, and the Eridani slavers. "Slavers are criminals that we try to combat. Navy vessels and police hunt them all the time, killing and capturing them when they can."

"We know," Zoe whispered warily, sounding politely appalled, "you even fight among yourselves. That seems incomprehensible."

Small wonder, especially if you studied human civilization with the sound off. Zoe considered all killing repulsive, and wanted it done as far off as possible. Since Greenies found 3V deathly boring, like watching paint dry, it was hopeless to think Zoe would pore over scenes of far off mayhem, trying to tell the good guys from the bad guys. Rachel sighed, saying, "We only fight because some of us cannot keep the peace and must be restrained—by force if need be. Though no one much likes it."

"But it would be better not to break the peace in the first place," Zoe suggested brightly.

"Would be," Rachel admitted, "but we are not built that way." Weirdest of all, Greenies were built that way, being happy, cooperative, pacifists who never harmed each other. They had no crime, politics, nor sexual mores; and were designed that way by humans. Rachel could even name the date. If Greenies were better than us, we had only ourselves to blame.

Zoe convinced her to hide the stinger in her coveralls. Though Zoe thought nothing of flying buck naked at noon, the Greenie considered carrying a gun to be obscene, like wearing a dildo on a chain around your neck. And Zoe did not even know about the microgrenade. No Greenie woman would ever touch a weapon, nor knowingly be with a man who carried one. Zoe tolerated the stinger, but told Rachel it was a horrible turn-off, "Which is too bad, because I like you."

"You do?" Greenies were naturally bisexual, but she was twice as big as Zoe, besides being off color. And aside from saving the Greenie's life, she had done nothing that constituted a come on, unless you counted the strip tease.

"Oh, I know it is all a fantasy, growing from my addiction to watching slaver women on 3V." Zoe treated xeno-lesbian relations as casual conversation, never imagining her armed slaver giantess might be offended. "You have that feel of strength and command we only get from men, and yet you are a woman. More than a man's strength, but with a woman's touch, that fantasy has always appealed to me. But, alas, the gun makes anything between us impossible."

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You bet. Zoe was not her type either. Rachel had never thought of herself as butch, but it was hard not to amid a horde of eager-to-please pacifists who barely came up past her waist. Greenies did not actually bow to her, but they did find her an airy room to sleep in, stocked with fruit, nuts, hard cheeses, vinegared rice, and spiced cider. Fragrant vines twined in the windows, accompanied by the click of wind chimes. For the first time in days she could relax, putting worries aside, pampered by folks biologically designed to serve people. Totally delighting the Greenies. She was the first "slaver" woman they had seen, the first female from that fabulous race that created them, and Greenies flocked to serve her.

Rachel became one of their rare vices. Drugs did not tempt them, and they drank without being drunks. Some claimed to like her recorded music, but it was more affection than addiction. True Greenie delights were live music, games, food, work, and sex. Lots of sex. Greenies were born immune to every known STD, and had no prejudices against sex with humans, even humans who towered over them. But such flattering attention had its downside—being a xenobiologist Rachel knew that all children born to humans and Greenies were Greenies. So their make love not war philosophy was an excellent way of filling Human Space with Greenies. Tigris Eridani was already theirs—both A and B systems would be set aside for Greenies, off-limits to human settlement. Colony ships en route would be diverted to other systems, and when law and order reached this part of the Eridani, the Navy would protect Greenie ownership even against other humans. Something Zoe could not comprehend, but her people were sure to profit from. In the meantime, all they wanted was for Rachel to stay and have big healthy Greenie babies. It never entered their heads to send her home. Home was right here.

Which brought her back to Tigger. While she had been reclining on cushions, lulled to sleep by jasmine and wind chimes, Tigger was in a sealed cell, fed through a slot near the floor—Greenies were pacifists, but not idiots. Happy as always to see her, Tigger greeted her with a toothy grin, "Hi! Human, what a relief. I am mortally tired of talking to Greenies. Their inoffensive goody-goodyness just gets to you, does it not?"

She had to admit it did. Zoe's smiling elfin face looked awfully like the next stage in human evolution, whether humans willed it or not.

Tigger shook his head. "Such mindless sanctimony makes you want to rip them apart and stomp on the pieces."

Rachel was unwilling to go that far. The galaxy was more than big enough for everyone—but she could easily imagine a future in which ordinary humans would have to get on ships and go somewhere hundreds of light years away, just to escape their own creations. "They blasted both our ships without warning," Tigger pointed out, pleased to find something they agreed on, "killing all our shipmates. Now we, the sole survivors, are made to feel guilty, just because they are so helpless and friendly."

"And because we bred them to serve us, and now see them as rivals," Rachel added.

"Speak for yourself, Human," Tigger snarled, "we would never have bred anything so stupid. Not even to eat."

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Probably true, since SuperCats were notoriously picky about their prey. Making her wonder how Tigger was doing on a vegetarian diet—hopefully it made him more manageable. She started by saying, "You know, I never promised not to shoot you."

"Heavens no!" Tigger immediately dismissed her attempt at apology. "You made it plain you would. I chose to kill that Greenie, gambling that you would not fire."

"Well, now that you know I will, do you still want to go through that gate?" She tried to turn shooting Tigger into an argument for cooperation.

"More than ever!" Tigger exuded enthusiasm, showing no sign of holding a grudge. "Seeing Greenies again reminds me how much I hate them. The thought of spending the rest of my life among them makes my fur crawl."

"Good." He still had reason to help her. "So what exactly lies beyond this next gate? What is Orm like?"

"Orm has wide open spaces, good hunting, and excellent weather, unlike here. . . ."

She cut short the travelogue, saying, "All I need to know is how to leave. How are the gates connected? What are the codes?"

Tigger scoffed at her concern. "The simplest arrangement yet. Orm is an intersystem transfer hub, used to link all the local systems—the gates are arranged in a circle, opening onto a single node, so you can go straight to Amazon Eridani system. Though if you do you miss the breathtaking thrill of . . ."

"What about slavers?" Her biggest thrill would be getting past the place.

"Slavers?" Tigger looked surprised. "Of course, Orm is a transfer hub. And slavers love being at the center of things."

Orm sounded like a major slaver base—set in some lifeless system, or deep in interstellar space. "Orm" meant "worm" or "dragon" in a dead language, a typical slaver pun—since the world was a wormhole as well. Once there she would be totally at Tigger's mercy. "But I have your word you will let me go, if I get us through this next gate?"

"Absolutely!" Tigger looked astounded that she could doubt him. "I have no use for you whatsoever."

Good, since she had plenty of use for herself. "And the slavers?"

"What? Slavers want you?" Tigger looked even more astonished. "Do not worry, slavers have their standards. You would make for poor fun and bad breeding stock. Though you are young, and your organs would fetch a fair price."

Best she could expect was to be broken up for parts. Good news in a way—the less she was worth, the more likely she would get through. "Promise me you will not give me to them?"

"I will not give you to slavers," Tigger scoffed at the suggestion.

She took a deep breath, knowing she was putting herself in mortal danger. This was the classic prisoner's dilemma—the only way to escape was to trust in someone with every reason to betray you. "If we work together we can both go home alive. . . ."

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"Precisely my plan all along," Tigger purred.

". . . but if you betray me, I will kill you." She still had the grenade he did not know about.

"I would have it no other way," Tigger declared happily.

Zoe had more trouble grasping her decision. "Stay with us. You are safe here. Do not trust this SuperCat, he cares only for himself, and will do you ill as soon it serves him."

"All too true," Rachel admitted, "but this is my only chance to get home." It was trust Tigger, or become a Greenie—though she was too polite to say so. Neither Zoe nor any other Greenie attempted to stop her, and they were only too happy to be rid of Tigger. All their traps were designed to keep slavers out, not pen them in. Rachel said her good-byes, then was gone.

Tigger's Pride

This gate opened "underground" in what looked like a rock cut tunnel illuminated by tiny lights in the ceiling, ending in a blank wall. Stepping out of that wall into the tunnel, right behind Tigger, Rachel checked her recorder and saw nine months had passed—they were somewhere far outside Tigris Eridani system. In an Unknown Xeno artifact from the look of it. Like Tigger said, Orm was a hub designed to shuttle traffic between systems, not part of any particular system. A dozen meters down the tunnel was a human designed lock door, sealing off the tunnel. Tigger strode over and opened the lock, saying, "Come, the lock only holds one. I will meet you on the far side." Shutting the pressure door in her face, he cycled through.

She waited for the lock to clear, noting how the walls resembled a huge worm tunnel, another sign of that sardonic slaver sense of humor. Orm was literally a wormhole, letting her step through space-time at the speed of light. As the lock cycled, she took a moment to arm the microgrenade tucked behind her VTOL belt—grab it now, and the grenade would be live. Entering the lock, she saw Tigger had lied. The lock was regulation sized—in fact probably taken from a hijacked cargo ship. Tigger had wanted to go through the lock alone, for some reason of his own. Drawing her stinger, she set in on SLEEP.

When the inner door dilated, she found the tunnel ahead empty—night goggles let her see all the way to the end, where the tunnel joined several others. Tigger had given her the slip. Fear increased with each step as she strode swiftly down the tunnel to the junction, hoping he had just gotten ahead of her.

No such luck. Tigger had flown. Set in the floor was an open drop shaft leading deeper into Orm. Walking cautiously to the edge, Rachel looked down, seeing a shaft kilometers deep, and at the bottom a circle of green countryside. By jacking up the gain on her night goggles she could see trees and a winding stream. Strange to look down a hole many kilometers deep and see open country—but it did not look like a virtual effect.

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"Welcome to Orm," said a cheery voice behind her, startling Rachel, almost sending her tumbling down the shaft. "How good to have you here."

She spun about, stinger in hand, to find herself facing a dapper hologram wearing a commander's uniform and a pleasant smile. Handsome in a cool cynical fashion, with a smile as real as a hologram's can be—he seemed very happy to see her. How often did victims come walking into his web? Clicking hologram heels, the slaver introduced himself, "Commander Hess of the *Hiryu* at your service. And you are?"

"Student Cadet Rachel Naomi Mohammed-Cohen," she told him evenly, holstering her stinger, since threatening a hologram was pointless. Technically she was alone, talking to an image projected by 3V cams, totally safe for the moment—or so she told herself. "Attached to the survey ship *Amelia Earhart*."

"Survey vessel," Hess looked impressed. "Born in space?"

Rachel nodded warily, never having been so afraid of a holo.

"So was I," Hess confided, "aboard the *Hiryu*. What ship?"

"*Nefertiti*." No harm in saying that.

Hess' smile widened, acknowledging the name. "Who has not heard of *Nefertiti?*" Even a slaver could admire the romance of exploration and survey ships, making the first planetfalls in promising systems. *Nefertiti* had an impressive history of achievements, including first ship into the Far Eridani, and the discovery of numerous habitable planets, when many ships never found any. "You can add Orm to your ship's list of discoveries."

She sure could—plus Enkidu, Marduk, and points in between. If she got back to report. "I came in with a SuperCat who was taking me to Amazon Eridani. Have you seen him?"

Hess shook his head sadly, "You never can trust a cat."

"What do you mean?" Fear tightened inside her, though all she faced was a holo.

"You are not going to Amazon E." Hess nodded toward the tunnels behind her. Turning, she saw an armored robot emerge and trundle toward her, its gun turret trained at her, steel tentacles reaching out. Seeing the stinger would be useless, she grabbed the grenade. Four seconds after she let go, it would explode—taking out both of them. Hess would lose his robot and his prize. The robot's programming seemed to sense this, and kept its distance.

Hess, being a holo, stepped closer, acting as the voice of reason. "Come, you are not really going to blow yourself up?"

"Why not?" She looked back at the robot, which had started to move again. Cams on the bot were tracking her eyes, waiting for her to look away.

"Not being blown to pieces is enough for most people," Hess pointed out.

Bare existence, about the best slavers had to offer. But as long as she had the grenade, she had a choice, so she held it higher. "Not enough. I want to go to Amazon E."

"For which we get what?" Hess asked, hovering just out of sight.

"One working robot," she shot back over her shoulder, knowing she did not have much to bargin with. But she could still make a break to get

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back through the Tigris Eridani gate to the Greenies. She got ready to throw the grenade to cover her escape, unless Hess came up with a better offer. "Plus whatever damage this grenade does to your gates."

"This grenade?" Hess asked, stepping up and seizing her hand, his fingers closing over hers, keeping her from triggering the grenade. His cold firm hand was a shock, no longer a hologram, twisting hard and hurting her, forcing the grenade from her hand. Barely believing he had suddenly materialized, she reached instinctively for her stinger, finding the holster empty. Hess had it tucked into his uniform belt, having lifted it from the holster as he seized her hand. While her attention had been on the armored robot, the real Commander Hess had stepped out of one of the tunnels, taking the holo's place. Then he had walked over and grabbed her—a neat nasty trick. Nursing her hurt wrist, she stood wondering what would come next.

Idly turning the microgrenade over in his hand, Hess studied it for a moment, then tossed it into the drop shaft. Four seconds later, a burst of fire shot out of the shaft, splashing off the pink ceiling above. Had it gone off in her hand, it would have taken out her, Hess, and the robot.

Or maybe not the robot. Hess touched a remote clipped to his belt, and the armored robot vanished. It had been a holo, which was why it never came too close, relying on terror and distance to give it bulk. "Neat trick, no?" Hess asked, plainly pleased with himself. Unarmed, using nothing but a glib line, and a couple of clever holos, Hess had taken her grenade and stinger away from her—deftly displaying his superiority. "Now we can talk freely, without having to wave weapons about."

Her heart sank, seeing herself headed for the organ banks or worse. Fully armed and alert, with overwhelming firepower, she had still been no match for the first slaver who came along. Hess made her look helpless as a Greenie. Reaching inside his tunic, Hess produced a thin black slave-collar, adjusting it to her neck-size, saying, "This will not hurt, and it will help us keep track of you."

He was bigger and stronger than her, and now had her stinger, making it pointless to resist. Reluctantly Rachel stretched out her throat to let Hess lock the collar around her neck. He took hold of her chin, lifting it slightly, saying, "Not bad bone structure. Biosculpt could do wonders, but you look so-so as breeding stock. Are you smart?"

"I thought I was," Rachel admitted, right now feeling like a total idiot, fooled by Tigger, then casually tripped up by Hess.

He closed the collar around her neck, locking it in place, saying, "Luckily, peddling you is not my problem."

"Why?" She felt very much like a commodity, with the tamper-proof collar around her throat, tagged for sale.

"You already have an owner." Hess traced the line of her jaw with his finger.

She shook off his hand. If she belonged to someone, Hess had no right to handle the merchandise. "Who?"

Hess laughed, taking away her VTOL belt. "Tigger, that SuperCat you came in with."

That flea-bitten beast! After all his toothy assurances that he had no

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"use" for her—that the bioconstruct should lie so blandly seemed utterly unfair.

"Let me show you how your collar works." Hess pulled the remote from his belt and pointed it at her. "It not only reports your position, and relays commands, but it also sends signals straight to your brain stem and peripheral nerves."

"What sort of signals?" she asked suspiciously, glad she did not belong to Hess.

Hess smiled, saying, "Sensory signals." He pressed down a button on the remote. Instantly she felt a pang of desire so intense it made her gasp in surprise, as her knees buckled and she felt a flush of pleasure spread through her thighs.

Laughing at his little joke, Hess lifted his finger and her arousal vanished, replaced by shame and anger. "Or motor signals. . . ." Hess pressed another button, then thumbed the controls beside it.

She lost control of her legs. Working on their own, her legs turned her about, and headed toward the drop shaft. She struggled to stop herself, but Rachel had no conscious control below her waist. Her legs carried her to the brink of the open drop shaft, then stepped off into space. Hess called out as she fell, "Give my best to Tigger."

What a ghastly creep. Falling full speed down the long drop shaft, she could not get away from Hess fast enough. Obnoxious as Greenies might be, *Homo sapiens* were coming off far worse. In fact, her short talk with Hess made her glad to belong to a SuperCat, showing just how badly humans were looking—at least as potential masters.

Built by the Unknown Xenos, this drop shaft did not work like human designs—no controls for one thing—and instead of a steady descent, she fell faster and faster. Then at the halfway point her fall began to slow, until by the time she reached the far end of the shaft she was barely moving at all, slowing until she hung in midair at the mouth of the shaft, suspended above a green valley carved by a meandering river. Blue sunlit sky extended in every direction, but she could tell that was a hologram effect. What looked like a long valley in a planet's surface was really an enclosed hoop-shaped habitat spinning in space. There was no "outside" to the valley, and if she followed the river far enough, she would find herself back where she started. Still, the effect was impressive.

As she hung there, an open hovercar climbed up meet her, growing bigger as it got closer. Suddenly, someone cut the string, and she was falling again, straight out the mouth of the shaft, to land in the padded back seat of the hovercar. Tigger sat at the controls. "Buckle up," the SuperCat advised, "it is several klicks to *terra firma*."

She buckled herself in behind him, thinking Zoe had been terribly right about Tigger. "You furry bastard, you swore you would take me to Amazon E."

"Tactical evasion," Tigger declared, "a justified subterfuge, since you would not have aided me had I told the truth."

"Why not just do what's right," she suggested, "then there would be no reason to lie."

"Some gratitude," Tigger retorted, "I saved your life."

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"How do you figure that? Without me, you would still be back in Tigris Eridani orbiting the wreck of the *Draco*." She never should have let him out of the box.

"I could have left you to Hess," he explained. "You know you are useless as breeding stock, which means the organ banks, unless someone bought you for private use."

"You said you have no use for me," she pointed out.

Tigger shrugged. "Someone else does."

"Who?" She tried to imagine who Tigger could possibly want to curry favor with.

"You'll see," Tigger yawned, tired of arguing.

"No good, tell me now." Slave or not, she was tired of Tigger's high-handedness; besides, he would treat her no better for obeying, and no worse for objecting. Producing a remote, Tigger pointed it at her and pressed a button. She started to protest but discovered that she was dumb, her larynx paralyzed, so she could breathe and swallow, but not speak. Flying in silence, Rachel cursed her master mentally—as slaves had done throughout the ages.

Herds of megafauna grazed the green-gold flats below—giant ground sloths, fast-moving antelope, and huge lumbering *Baluchitherium gigan-ti,* worried by packs of steppe hyenas. Above them, purple snowcapped peaks hovered in hazy blue distance. Vertical cliffs cut the "valley" off from the virtual mountains and hologram sky. She worked out the shape of the habitat in her head, a huge wheel spinning in space about the speed-of-light gates, with the drop shaft as one of the spokes, while this river valley ran inside the rotating rim. "Energy comes from mass converters installed by slavers," Tigger explained. "They say the place was frozen solid when they found it."

She had no comment. Ahead a settlement grew in size, and Tigger set down on a dusty LZ ringed by prefabs, one of which was "his"—though to Rachel, nothing about the place positively said Tigger. Two nearly bare rooms, and a kitchenette-cum-sanitary unit seemed more like a zoo cage than a home, even for a SuperCat—nor did she relish sharing the space with him. That he had not hurt her yet did not mean that he never would—it would be totally like Tigger to treat her like a pal, then feed her to someone he hoped to impress, or use her as bait for jackals. As a slave she had no say in the matter.

At least he would not rape her. Normal SuperCat males were only aroused by female SuperCats in heat, and had no sexual interest in *Homo sapiens*, male or female. No more than a human would normally mate with a panther. Which was not to say it was never done—but Tigger did not seem the type. If he had a huge unnatural attraction to humans, he hid it awfully well.

"Your collar is set for a couple of klicks," Tigger told her, "don't try to go farther away." Then he left, forgetting to turn her voice back on. She tried to call after him, but it was hopeless, and the hovercar disappeared downriver. Tiger had not said when he would be back.

For a while she sat and fumed, then since none of the voice activated appliances would work, she fixed herself a meal manually. Tired of wait-

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ing for Tigger to return, she went for a walk, taking in the river valley at ground level. River ringed the LZ on three sides, but the fourth side opened straight onto the veldt, and she saw antelope looking curiously back at her from less than two hundred meters, and farther off Cape buffalo came down to drink. Rich hydroponic-fed grasslands supported herds of herbivores, held in check by packs of hyenas and dire wolves—all the animals came from biobanks on hijacked colony ships. Her only company was a hunting party of Eridani slavers, marginally human, decorated with dragon tattoos, and in some cases scale armor grafted onto their torsos. They were armed with assault weapons, which hardly seemed fair, but they had been drinking heavily as well, giving the game animals half a chance. With them were a couple of the unhappiest Greenies she had ever seen, two slim girls wearing nothing but slave collars. Seeing her collar, a drunk slaver called out, "Who do you belong to?"

When she did not answer, someone must have told him because he called out again, "Cat got your tongue?"

His buddy, who actually had devil's horns grafted onto his head, asked, "How does it feel to fuck a Furball?"

You tell me, she thought, but of course could not say it. Neither Greenie found their master's comments funny, huddled together away from the guns, looking hopefully at her. She wished she could do something for them, but she could not even save herself.

More armed drunken slavers arrived, and Rachel retreated to Tigger's place, finding Tigger still gone. So much for sightseeing. Her silent tour had turned up nothing useful, merely confirming that she was in a beautiful but terrible place, where men slaughtered wild creatures for amusement—one of those secret slaver bases the Navy would never find. Discouraged and depressed, she curled up on a foam mat for a fitful sleep.

When she woke up, 3V night had fallen outside, house lights had come on, and hologram stars were out overhead—not the strange constellations of Eridani sector, but the classic ones of Old Earth—Orion, Canis Major, the Big and Little Dippers, Leo the lion. But still no Tigger. Taking a hot manual shower, she thoroughly searched the premises, finding Tigger's data recorder. By setting it to MUTE, she got it to display a keyboard, letting her type in commands. Tigger had no locks on the system, and probably did not know it obeyed non-voice commands. Inside was a trove of information, slave contracts, human inventories, descriptions of raids and hijackings, future projects, and priceless details like the location and codes for the speed-of-light gates, even the code for Tigger's hovercar. Overjoyed, she downloaded everything into her own recorder, and memorized the gate codes needed to get her to Amazon E. Now she just had to get the hovercar away from Tigger.

But when the cat came back a day later, he was all business, hustling her immediately into the hovercar and winging away at treetop level, sending pronghorns scattering over the savanna. Still unable to speak, she studied the controls instead, finding them simple enough, a manual yoke and autopilot—Tigger preferred to lean back, flying with his feet, weaving between rock outcroppings and tall termite spires, talking aloud to her. Given the chance, she could certainly fly it to the gate.

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What looked like a pile of boulders ahead turned out to be a dwelling cut into a hillside and topped with rocks; glass windows and stone entrances gave it an ageless look, part cave dwelling, part terrarium. SuperCats lounged on the bouldered roof, catching afternoon rays. Swooping down, they landed on dry clay pan next to the glassed-in lion's den, and the cats slowly uncoiled, descending to meet them. Rachel recognized a pride of females, something humans almost never got to see. SuperCats had a secretive home life. Males roamed freely about, working as mercs and bodyguards, but females sought out secluded spots where they could rear their cubs in natural settings—not always easy to do in the Far Eridani. Tigger told her cheerfully, "Well, it has been fun, and I will always be grateful to you for finding me and bringing me home."

She glared back, wishing she had shot him. Somehow she had known this moment would come, when she would trust Tigger too much, and he would betray her—still she came along, hoping Tigger would surprise her. Now she struggled not to cry.

"Nothing to say?" Tigger arched an eyebrow, acting as if he had forgotten he'd turned off her voice. "I do not blame you. I'm not much for sentiment either," Tigger admitted, "so behave yourself and follow orders, and you should do fine."

Fine as what? Lunch? She was bursting to talk, to find out what was going on, and to tell Tigger off. Which was probably why he kept her on MUTE.

"But remember," he warned, "you are dealing with females from now on—not nearly so easygoing as I. Give them the grief you gave me, and they will rip you to pieces in homicidal frustration—something to do with their hormones."

On that happy note he escorted her from the hovercar and presented her to the pride. Female SuperCats looked her over critically, asking, "How old is she? Where did you find her?"

"In Tigris Eridani A," Tigger explained, "soon as I saw her, I thought of you. She is fully grown, fairly respectful, obedient, housebroken and reasonably intelligent. Keep her busy, and she will not get into trouble."

"Where does she come from?" asked a female in her prime who the others deferred to and obeyed, probably the pride leader.

Tigger shrugged. "Hard to tell with humans, they are all over the place, breeding like Greenies."

"Perhaps she could tell us," a subordinate suggested. "Does she talk?"

"Only if you want her to." Tigger happily handed the remote to the alpha female.

"Maybe later," the pride leader motioned with the remote, saying, "come meet the cubs." Having small choice in the matter, Rachel followed the females into the den's cool glass and stone interior. Shafts of sunlight fell from skylights onto packed earth floor that smelled like a pet cubicle. Ramps led to the sunning area on the roof, and a gleaming metal lavatory-kitchenette stood in one corner, a light compact model that came from a naval vessel.

"Keep the den clean," the pride leader told her, "and see the cubs are entertained. Broaden their education by telling stories about whatever part

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of the galaxy you are from, but nothing too scary—you know how cubs are. When you take them out, make sure the younger ones do not wander off, and do not let the older males crowd them out at feeding time, or when they catch small animals to torment. If you spot any young or handicapped animals on the veldt, have the cubs worry them to death—slowly though, getting full use out of each victim, while keeping an eye out for jackals and hyenas. And rocs overhead. Do not hesitate to sacrifice yourself, since if anything happens to the cubs you will be hunted down without mercy. Understood?"

Rachel nodded, mindful of Tigger's warning. These were wild beasts who would kill her if she became the least bit difficult.

"And that male who brought you; do not let him get near the cubs," the pride leader added. "You are ours now."

Rachel nodded again, knowing SuperCat males were notoriously dangerous to cubs by other fathers, killing them on the sly to make room for their own offspring.

"Good." Growling for attention, the SuperCat matriarch turned to the assembled cubs, a couple of which were as tall as Rachel, with four-inch canines. Even the smallest were bigger than bobcats, with needle-sharp fangs. All eyed her hungrily, eagerly expecting food or excitement, or hopefully both. The pride leader told them, "This is a human, who belongs to the pride, so she is not to be hurt or eaten."

Little furry faces fell, asking, "What is she for then?"

"She is for you," explained the mother SuperCat, "to play with, and keep you company. Part of your education is to learn to tolerate humans, so keep your claws sheathed, and no chasing her to death—understood?"

Furry heads nodded eagerly, excited by their new prize, pleading with their pride leader, "Can we stalk her at least?"

"Only if she gets a fair start." Holding the remote aloft, the matriarch asked, "Do you want her to talk?"

"Make her talk, Mama, make her talk," squealed the youngest cubs, a cute pair of females that still had their baby spots.

"Did you finish playing with that baby antelope buck I brought you?"

"We did, we did," the cubs chorused. "He's gone. All gone. We saved the hooves."

"Since you have been good." Pressing the remote, the SuperCat restored her vocal cords, asking her, "Have you any special talents?"

"I am a xenobiologist." Was a xenobiologist. Sole survivor of the Tigris Eridani expedition, now a nanny-cum-nursery pet.

"How delightful," declared the pride leader, pleased to own such a knowledgeable human. "She can tell you all about prey on different planets."

"Cool!" chorused the cubs. Turning abruptly, the matriarch vanished up a packed earth ramp, leaving Rachel with the litter. Cubs swarmed over her, asking where she was from, and how she got here, forcing her to sit down on the dirt floor of the den and tell her whole story beginning to end. Then they demanded to hear it again, or at least the highlights—her crash, destroying the Greenie missile battery, and eluding the traps in air, land, and water. Stalking from gate to gate among the stars excited them

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immensely, especially the two oldest males, who acted out the action, fighting over the right to be Tigger.

Meanwhile the moms took Tigger upstairs for a rooftop orgy full of snarls, shrieks, and ecstatic howls that carried down to the den. SuperCat mating was not done over champagne on a float-a-bed, being more like hormonal combat. Clearly Tigger had found a pride with several females in heat, and brought her along as a present, plus a distraction for the cubs. Her own gaze kept turning toward Tigger's hovercar sitting on the clay pan. If she could get to it and get away, she could fly straight to the dropshaft—if she could somehow disable her slave collar, or maybe steal the remote.

Sex took days, and was followed by feasting, then a lot of lying around. Rachel saw her chance coming—but just when the females were relaxed and sleepy, Tigger took off in the hovercar, headed who knew where.

Leaving her permanently installed as nursery pet, sleeping in a heap of young SuperCats, and eating naval rations from the kitchenette. SuperCats had no names, so Rachel gave some out—the two half-grown males, who could have killed her without much effort, became Trouble and Terror. Tina, a wild bossy teenager, was their littermate. Luckily their mother "Betty" was a beta female, and fear of the pride leader kept them marginally in line. Calling the alpha female Queen, Rachel named her twin daughters Athena and Artemis. Brat, Buster, and Bully had a beta female mother she named Bess, making eight cubs in all, eight crafty little brains all making mischief at once. With no chance of teaching them anything, Rachel answered any questions they asked, and tried to keep track of the smaller cubs—since the bigger ones were totally beyond her control, roaming the surrounding veldt and clay pan searching for excitement. Which seemed relatively safe, despite Queen's warning about hyenas. No sane predator would come near a SuperCat den.

Finally the pride roused itself for a hunt, tired of ship's rations and hungry to taste raw blood-warm meat. Of course the cubs wanted to go, but could only follow at a distance, so as not to disturb the quarry. Rachel went too, glad to have the cubs all headed in one direction, even if it was out onto the veldt.

Savanna stretched before her, yellow grassland bordered by green trees along the river, and the distant hazy escarpment rising toward the hologram sky. Gemsbok and impala grazed amid *Baluchitherium giganti,* the huge brontosaur-sized retrobred rhinoceros reconstructed by paleogeneticists centuries ago, along with the giant ground sloths and steppe hyenas. *B. giganti* were too huge even for SuperCats, and the smaller beasts were skittish, so the pride pushed on into the hot noontide.

Ahead she saw a shimmering black patch that on high power resolved itself into a herd of *Mbogo,* Cape buffalo, two meters tall at the shoulder, armed with heavy needle-sharp horns, a mean disposition, and four big mattock-like hooves that could disembowel a lion. Just what the pride was looking for. Queen came around in person, warning the cubs to keep back and be quiet. Cape buffalo, *Syncerus caffer,* were serious business, since besides their awesome natural weapons, they had sharp eyes, keen ears, and a better sense of smell than a SuperCat. That anyone would ac-

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tually try to kill a ton of angry Cape buffalo with their teeth utterly amazed Rachel, but the pride casually fanned out into the tall grass, vanishing so completely that even her night goggles could not find them.

Trouble immediately demanded that they follow, and Terror agreed, "It is not fair that we must stay behind."

Rachel paid no attention to the complaint, which was merely for effect, there no longer being any pride for them to follow. Instead she studied the Cape buffalo through her goggles, flipping on the audio, assuming the buffalo would spot the pride before they did. She counted about a dozen calves and more than twice that many adults, feeding quietly in grass and scrub, by the bank of a small stream. The thickest cover lay upwind in dense thickets and shade trees along the stream bed, where a trio of mature bulls were feeding, covering the rest of the herd. As Rachel watched, an old cow stuck her nostrils in the air, huffed loudly and started to hustle the calves away from the thickets. Alerted, the trio of bulls stuck their big black noses in the air, snorting, and sharpening their hooves against the ground. Cows and calves drifted quietly away downwind.

Not fast enough. In a sudden blur a SuperCat launched herself at a terrified young cow that bolted and went bellowing through the scrub. But the cat was right after her, bounding up onto the horrified cow's neck, and clamping her saber-like canines around the Cape buffalo's windpipe. Cheers came from the cubs, who recognized the attacker even at a distance. Trouble, Terror, and Tina shouted, "Kill her! Mama, kill her! Kill the fat dumb cow!"

Clinging to the buffalo's neck, "Betty" bit down hard, crushing the cow's throat and severing an artery. Shock alone should have brought the buffalo down, but a Cape buffalo cow can store oxygen in her brain, and keep going with killing wounds. Hooking and kicking, the cow tossed the SuperCat to the ground, and went tearing off, a pencil thin stream of blood spurting several meters from a sabre-tooth wound in her throat.

Rachel focused her goggles on the downed SuperCat, seeing if Betty was all right. Dazed, the beta female got to her feet and looked about. Bearing down on her was one of the guardian bulls, better than a ton of angry beef-on-the-hoof aiming to trample Betty into the grassroots, unless the horns got her first. Spinning about, Betty sprinted for the trees, zig-zagging at superhuman speed. But the enraged bull came thundering up the SuperCat's stubby little tail, nimble as a ballet dancer and zigging with each zag. Rachel held her breath, knowing Betty had no chance, while at her elbow, Tina shouted, "Run, mama! Run!"

Trouble was on the other side of her, as was Terror. Luckily none of them could see as well as she, and did not know how hopeless the race was—but in another instant they would see their mother killed. . . .

Another tawny blur burst from the trees—this time it was Queen, shooting past Betty, headed straight at the charging bull. Stubbornly refusing to be deflected, the Cape buffalo stuck to Betty's tail, unswayed by the pride leader's charge. As the bull brushed past her, Queen caught the buffalo's muzzle with her claws. Digging in her heels, the pride leader pulled the bull's head sharply down and back. Unable to gore with its muzzle

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snagged, *Mbogo* twisted about, cartwheeling tail over toenails across the scrub. One horn hit in a spray of dust, and a ton of misguided momentum snapped the Cape buffalo's neck.

Cubs cheered. That's why they call them SuperCats. In a couple of seconds, Queen had reduced the charging Cape buffalo to a thrashing tangle of flailing limbs, unable to get up. Pride members leaped on the disabled beast, the veldt version of helping the handicapped.

"Wonderful," purred a voice behind her, and she turned to see Tigger standing at her shoulder, grinning happily. Behind him sat the hovercar, which had set down silently while she was mesmerized by the hunt. "Females do know how to set out supper."

Tigger swaggered off through the grass clumps, headed for the feeding frenzy. SuperCats had a taste for *Mbogo* meat, which was merely tough lean beef to Rachel. Ahead of him, Betty and Bess settled down to feed, while Queen and the younger females went charging after the wounded cow, who had left a big blood spoor. Tigger could hardly wait to join the fun.

Good riddance. She looked about, seeing the cubs watching with envy, since they were not allowed to feed on the veldt, where kills attracted hyenas and rocs. When they brought down the cow, they would drag the carcass to the den for the cubs. Which was where she herded them, despite complaints from Trouble and Terror, saying, "Who wants to eat a dusty old bull that's been chewed on and wrestled to death?"

"I do," Terror insisted.

"So do I," Trouble backed up his brother.

"Sounds good," the cubs claimed. Doing a quick head count, she managed to get them back home, promising a nice fat cow carcass was arriving soon. They asked excitedly, "How soon?"

"Real soon." Looking back across the clay pan at maximum magnification, Rachel could just make out the hovercar, still parked out on the veldt where Tigger had left it.

"Still warm?" demanded the cubs.

"Absolutely." She ticked off SuperCats in her head. Tigger had gone to join Betty and Bess at the kill site. Queen had gone tearing after the cow with the younger females. Eventually they would drag the carcass back to the cubs, but she could be in the hovercar and to the drop shaft before anyone missed her. "In fact, if I go get the dead cow in the hovercar, we could eat it even sooner."

"Oh, do! Oh, do!" the cubs chorused.

"Stay right here," she warned them, getting up to run. "I will be right back with the carcass."

MOVING?

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They called happily after her, "Hurry back."

Fat chance. She dashed across the clay pan, determined to use this tiny window when everyone was looking the other way. Once out the gate, she would be well beyond range of the remote—which Queen kept clipped to her belt. Finding the hovercar open and waiting, she strapped herself into the crash webbing, tapping in the control codes. Lights came on, along with engine power. Perfect. She pulled back on the yoke, the way she had seen Tigger do, feeling the ground fall away. She was airborne, and no one even knew she was away. How perfect was that?

Too perfect. It struck her that Tigger had practically handed her this escape on a platter—not just by leaving the hovercar open and unattended, but by having such loutish security to start with, and leaving her alone in that bare zoo-like apartment with the gate codes, then flying her here with nothing to do but watch him at the controls. Almost everything Tigger had done since bringing her here pointed toward this moment. Why? Just happenstance? Hardly likely.

Rachel swung the yoke around, taking a risk to be sure—if Queen spotted her, the remote would easily bring her down—but she needed a closer look at what she was leaving behind.

Vultures had spotted the kill site, and their circling had attracted a pair of rocs, but she found only two SuperCats gorging on the downed bull—Betty and Bess. Swinging downwind, she saw Queen and some younger females hauling a dead cow toward the den—but no sign of Tigger. Cutting back across the clay pan, she spotted Tigger edging toward the boulder pile, stalking the cubs. Here was Tigger's use for her—she was his way of separating the cubs from the pride. Before her coming the cubs would have hung around the kill site, or one of the young females would have watched them—but now the pride was accustomed to her having the cubs. And Tigger knew just the bait to draw her off.

Landing the hovercar on the clay pan between him and the den, she unbuckled the webbing and stood up. Tigger sauntered up to her, canines gleaming in the harsh hologram light, saying, "This is your chance to go."

"Really?" She eyed him sarcastically. "You made it remarkably easy."

"Anything for an old shipmate." Tigger's smile widened. "This is what you wanted, is it not?"

"To get away, yes," she admitted, "but not to see the cubs harmed."

"Just the males, I promise. So my sons will rule the litter." Tigger tried to look contrite, hard to do with sabre-teeth hanging past his jaw. "You get to go, and I get what I want—that's only fair. Admit you find the little monsters vicious and obnoxious. And if their mothers give permission, they would gleefully kill you."

Too true. Trouble and Terror for her freedom hardly seemed like a choice. All the males actually, but Tigger would give them a better death than they gave hapless antelope calves. And she would be free, able to meet her folks in Amazon Eridani.

Or would she? If Tigger had wanted her help, he could have asked for it, but instead he arranged to send her flying off to the speed-of-light gate unawares. Would Tigger also arrange for Hess to be there to meet her? After today Tigger would truly be done with her. Would he end things by

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setting her free, or by turning her over to her own kind to be degraded and murdered? Home or Hess? Lady or the Tiger? Alas, with Tigger she already knew. Reaching up, she grabbed her slave collar, yanking hard.

Her tamper-proof slave collar began to wail in alarm, and Queen's voice came over the collar, asking what was happening. "I am at the clay pan in front of the den," she told the collar. "Tigger is trying to harm the cubs."

"You silly hairless ape." Tigger shook his fanged head in disgust, ashamed of the species that made him. Pride members came sprinting across the clay pan from the kill sites, snarling in anger. Not wanting to be in the middle of an argument, Rachel vacated the hovercar. Tigger took one look at the angry mothers and hopped aboard, taking off with a jaunty wave, saying, "So long, Human, hope they tear you apart."

Queen demanded to hear everything, even the discreditable parts, like her desertion of the den and attempted escape. The pride leader merely asked, "Where did you hope to flee to?"

"Amazon Eridani system," she answered, seeing no reason to hide it from the alpha female.

"You were warned not to let that male near the cubs," Queen reminded her, "yet you ran anyway, which means you cannot be trusted. . . . "

"But no harm came to the cubs," she protested.

"Which is well," Queen agreed, "otherwise you would be dead. Since we cannot kill you, or keep you, we must send you away."

"Away, where?" Rachel asked cautiously.

Queen shrugged, saying, "To Amazon E, unless you have changed your mind."

"Oh, no," she quickly shook her head, "Amazon E will do fine."

Hess objected, as did the cubs. But she was clearly pride property, and Queen spoke for the pride. Being merely human, Hess gave in, only demanding her recorder so she could not reveal Orm's location. Rachel readily agreed—anything to be gone. Saying good-bye to the cubs, she set out through the last gate, headed for Amazon Eridani.

This gate opened on an artificial moonlet circling a gas giant at the outer edge of Amazon Eridani system. Local gates led deeper into the system, but the moonlet had air and power, and *Nefertiti* was only two months away, decelerating from light speed, so Rachel decided to hole up and wait, maintaining communications silence. By now she was well aware that anyone might be listening. Better to wait and tell her story in person. When *Nefertiti* got close enough, she beamed a tight nondescript distress signal to the mother ship, which dispatched a lander to investigate.

She stood waiting in her v-suit on a cracked and ancient icefield, watching while the lander came to rest. When the lock cycled, she entered and removed her v-suit. Word flashed through the lander that Rachel Naomi Mohammed-Cohen, assigned to the missing *Amelia Earhart,* had turned up two light years from where the *Earhart* was lost—the only member of the Tigris Eridani expedition to make rendezvous. Dad was aboard the *Nefertiti,* but her mother was the lander's crew chief, and the first one at the lock, throwing her arms around Rachel, asking, "How did you ever get here?"O

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TIMING IS EVERYTHING

The alien arrived unannounced.
She said she had been here before
and wanted to look up an old friend.
But no one remembered her
and none of the history books
mentioned her. We rolled our eyes,
discreetly, of course, and tapped
our temples and took her on the
grand tour of Earth. But the alien
was impatient and unimpressed.
I told you, she said, I've seen
this world. Now tell me, where is
my good friend, the giant lizard?
We stopped laughing then and showed
the alien some fossils of dinosaur
bones. I see, she said after several
uncomfortable moments when we didn't
know what to do with our hands
or how to explain that her friend
might well be taking wing at that
moment, in the soul of a
soaring red-tailed hawk.

—Mario Milosevic

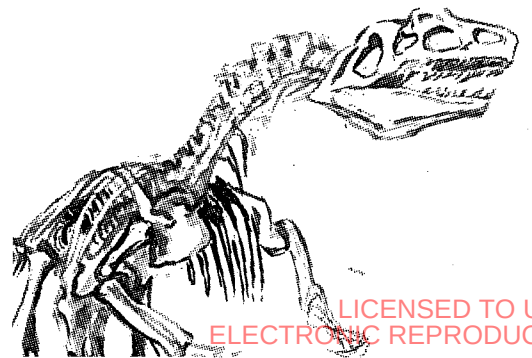

Illustration by June Levine

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

EVOLUTION
by Stephen Baxter
Del Rey, $25.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-345-45782-X

Baxter turns his hand to another Big Scientific Topic with this look at human evolution, from the unpromising Mesozoic start of the hominid line to its last gasp in the failing days of Earth. This one's very much a virtuoso feat of the imagination, covering millions of years of history with only the faintest of connections between the large number of characters, mostly female, who represent points along the evolutionary line that includes human beings as we know them. The comparison that will occur to many readers is Olaf Stapledon, and Baxter certainly shares with Stapledon a long-range view of our world and its inhabitants, looking at us as if at specimens in a cosmic microscope. But Baxter also has the ability, which Stapledon never quite attained, to invest his subjects with significant emotional depth. This is typically done by placing each of his characters in some crisis where their survival depends on the application of boldness and ingenuity, giving the reader a chance to appreciate them as "people."

Baxter takes the opportunity to create a number of extinct species for which paleontology has provided no evidence, among them intelligent, tool-using dinosaurs. These, as well as the various prehistoric humanoid societies he postulates at various steps along the evolutionary ladder, give the book much of its hard-science edge. In contrast with his earlier book, *Manifold: Origin,* where Baxter generally showed the reader the world through the eyes of the various modern human characters, here the viewpoint characters are almost entirely of species other than our own—although all are in one direct line of evolution.

Baxter's larger narrative is the culmination of the tiny triumphs and discoveries of all the characters who step onto the stage and then fade into the fossil record—or, in the case of some of the more improbable ancestral species, out of it entirely. The narrative reminds readers of the connections when one or another of the ancestral bones comes into the hands of a later character—an effective way to remind us that each of these stories takes place in the context of an ongoing story. But while the earlier chapters are a tale of growth and change, the later ones make clear that our species is ultimately faced with a tragic end.

Baxter locates humanity's tragic flaw somewhere in the late Paleolithic, where a power-mad woman essentially invents religion as a means of controlling her tribe. This event resonates down the ages, but has its most crucial impact in the frame story, which follows a group of women paleontologists and other scientists attending an international scientific conference. They arrive just in time for the great pivot point

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of the plot: a combination of political and natural events that tips the planetary environment past a point of no return, ultimately ending civilization (and the human race) as we know it. At least in this version of the future, the stars will not be ours—although our species will leave many descendants to people the stage in the final acts of the long drama of life on Earth.

A strong, emotionally complex performance by Baxter; this may be the book to break him out into recognition beyond the regular SF readership.

THRESHOLD
by Sara Douglass
Tor, $25.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-312-87687-4

Douglass's books, first published in her native Australia, have been coming out in a breathless rush of first US editions from Tor. This one's a good example of her appeal: a fantasy romance with a quasi-Egyptian setting, showing a gift for vivid images and fascinating detail.

Tirzah, the narrator, is a young woman working with her father, a master glassworker. After falling into debt, they are sold as slaves and sent to Ashdod, a southern kingdom where their skills are in demand for an enormous glass-covered pyramid, Threshold. At first Tirzah's youth makes Threshold's builders doubt whether she can do the fine work required. She is tested by Boaz, a Mage, who watches her create a beautiful glass sculpture of a frog, then destroys it to show her that she is powerless. Even so, she passes the test: she and her father are sent to work on Threshold.

Other glassmaking slaves tell Tirzah that her unusual skill is a gift from elemental spirits, the Soulenai, who inhabit glass and other natural substances. The Magi forbid worship of any but the harsh deity to whom Threshold is dedicated, and for a slave to call on other gods is death. When Tirzah recognizes her gift, and learns to enter into communication with the Soulenai, she wins the confidence of the leading slaves, who enlist her in their planned rebellion against their masters.

Then Boaz arrives to replace the former master builder, under whose rule progress has been too slow, and the slaves' hardships are multiplied. When Boaz takes Tirzah as his concubine, the other slaves urge her to use the opportunity to spy on the Magi. But to Tirzah's surprise, Boaz is somehow aware of the slaves' conspiracies. In order to avoid betraying her friends, she refrains from reporting anything she learns—which the others interpret as evidence of the Mage's cruelty to her.

As Threshold continues to grow, the pyramid appears to have an evil consciousness all its own, and it begins selecting victims to fall prey to "accidents" during its construction. Meanwhile, Tirzah begins to see the human side of Boaz, and eventually they become lovers. When, after several clear warnings, catastrophe finally strikes, she and Boaz lead a group of refugees into exile, from which they hope to return to defeat the evil that the Magi have set loose in Ashdod.

The plot as described is more or less standard fantasy fare, and the romantic twist is in its own way largely formulaic. Where Douglass shows her individuality is in the creation of a body of myth and lore

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that makes the world of Ashdod come alive. The glass frog that Tirzah makes is the first in a series of frog images that she roots in the folklore and ultimately in the magic of her plot. A hint in Greek legend that the Pythagoreans borrowed their number lore from the Egyptians becomes, here, a substructure of numerology that gives Threshold added resonance. And at the bottom lies what might best be called a Lovecraftian premise: the "god" the Magi hope to reach by building their threshold into another dimension turns out to be an alien entity that sees its human worshipers primarily as food.

While this one seems especially likely to appeal to readers whose literary diet includes the occasional romance, Douglass's other books show her to be an unusually versatile writer. You might give her a try next time you're looking for something different in the fantasy line.

SEVEN LAYERS OF SKY
by Liz Williams
Bantam Spectra, $5.99 (mm)
ISBN: 0-553-58499-5

Williams's fourth novel is set in Central Asia, among the ruins of various former Soviet Republics, some time in the near future. The two primary characters are Elena Inrinovna, a middle-aged scientist left stranded by the collapse of the Russian space program, and Ilya Muromyets, an all-but-immortal *bogatyr,* one of the folk heroes of the Russian people. When the novel opens, both are in desperate straits. Elena and her sister are trying to save enough money for themselves and their mother to emigrate to Canada; we meet Elena as she carries out a small-time smuggling operation, and during a border stop, picks up an apparently insignificant item from the snow.

Ilya is in Petrograd, strung out on heroin and stabbed when a drug buy goes wrong. His wounds appear mortal, but he is saved by a *rusalka,* a terrifying creature out of Russian legend, who comes and heals him with an inhuman kiss. Unfortunately, Ilya doesn't want to be healed; his life is at rock-bottom, and he is only hoping to die. As a last resort, he makes a deal with a shady operative (KGB? who can tell?) to recover an object from Central Asia—obviously the object that Elena has found—in exchange for which he will be allowed to die.

Naturally, the two end up together; as they slowly begin to learn, the object Elena has found is a key to an alternate world, in which dreams are true—in particular, the collective dream of a Russia in which the Revolution turned out, well, if not quite perfect, much better than in our history. The complication arises from the presence in that world of other dreams, some of which are considerably less benign. And, naturally enough, the guardians of the revolutionary state are actively working to prevent the representatives of other realities from impinging too strongly on their own. Ilya and Elena bounce back and forth between the two worlds, searching for safety for her and solace for him; on the way he finds an ancient enemy, another immortal *bogatyr,* who has made his own compromises with the modern world.

Williams effectively evokes both the central Asia of today and the Soviet state as it might have been, with a strong descriptive touch and a fine sense of the telling detail. Check this one out.

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SPIN STATE
by Chris Moriarty
Bantam, $11.95 (tp)
ISBN: 0-553-382123-6

Chris Moriarty's first novel is set in a space-going future where the differences between hardware, software, and wetware have become impossibly blurred. The protagonist is Major Catherine Li, a UN peacekeeper sent to a mining planet to investigate the suspicious death of a leading physicist, Hannah Sharifi. Homicide investigations aren't Li's usual business, but this case is important first because the mine where Sharifi died is the human race's main source of Bose-Einstein condensate, the crystalline quantum substance without which interstellar travel and communication would be excruciatingly slow, if not all but impossible. (As those who've kept up with physics know, the stuff is real enough; its properties are sufficiently in the realm of speculation to leave room for a novel or two. Moriarty provides a reading list for readers wanting to run their own check on the book's physics.)

Almost at once Major Li sees that the case is far more complex than it appears on the surface. The mines are of the highest strategic value, both to the UN and to its offworld adversaries. Both management and labor are struggling to seize control of the key commodity they produce. And Sharifi, it appears, was on the trail of this era's scientific holy grail, a way to synthesize the Bose-Einstein condensates and bring an end to the misery of the near-slaves who work the pits. From Li's point of view, the entire story is complicated by the fact that she herself is a product of the mining world—a fact she has hidden from her superiors, and that might bring her down if it were known to the wrong people.

Partnered with an incredibly ancient and preposterously decadent AI, Li uncovers one layer of secrets after another. Sharifi's death is ultimately just the most visible manifestation of a hidden clash of forces that threatens to bring down the entire structure of society. Moriarty keeps the action moving, with both overt and subterranean conflicts, hidden agendas and blatant power plays spurring on an incredibly complex plot.

A strong debut, using a hard SF McGuffin to spin a thriller in the best cyberpunk mode.

SHADOWS OVER BAKER STREET
edited by Michael Reaves and John Pelan
Del Rey, $23.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-345-45528-2

This one could serve as a definition of "high concept": Sherlock Holmes meets the Cthulhu mythos. The greatest of Victorian detectives turns his keen eye and keener intellect to the uncovering of the dark secrets of the Elder Gods. And in fact, many of H.P. Lovecraft's best stories in the mythos owes much to both the tone and the structure of Conan Doyle's great detective tales. In one sense, Dr. Watson is the quintessential Lovecraftian narrator, seeing just enough to make tantalizingly wrong guesses at the story's hidden matter, until events reveal the truth behind it all.

This kind of anthology idea has the merits of being easy to describe and (given a sufficiently cynical take on how books are marketed) easier than most to sell. The downside of such an approach is that it's all too easy to crank out a story ful-

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filling the requirements of the formula without exerting a great deal of creativity. Every competent amateur has undoubtedly taken a fling at a pastiche of Holmes, or a tour of the Lovecraftian landscape. And even the best of those stories have the tendency to resemble the kind of improv where an actor puts on a funny hat and a quaint regional accent and sees where the spirit of the moment leads. An actor—or a writer—can have a lot of fun doing that, and can even learn a fair amount about craft, as well as the advantages and limitations of formula. But from the point of view of an audience, the results can be very hit-or-miss.

Reaves and Pelan have called on writers whose usual stomping grounds range from horror and mystery to SF: Neil Gaiman, Poppy Z. Brite, Steve Perry, Barbara Hambly, and Richard Lupoff, as well as the anthologists themselves. Curiously enough, the ones who do best at blending the two fictional universes seem to be those most willing to take the premise of the anthology most seriously, drawing on both the Holmesian and Lovecraftian formulas and finding where they really do fit—and following up the implications of that fit.

With "A Study in Emerald," Neil Gaiman turns in the strongest treatment of the theme, invoking the formulas only to subvert them; he ends up by creating a genuine tour de force, throwing both his models into new perspective. Not surprisingly, Hambly and Perry also manage to create engaging fiction from the unlikely intersection of Baker Street and Arkham. And enough of the others succeed on the terms of the anthology to make it worth a look. But the Gaiman deserves special mention; even if you've never acquired a taste for either the Holmes stories or Lovecraft's mythos, his entry is well worth looking for.

THE BEST AMERICAN SCIENCE WRITING 2003
Edited by Oliver Sacks; series editor Jesse Cohen
Ecco (HarperCollins), $27.50 (hc)
ISBN 0-06-621163-8

Here's as good a starting place as any for readers who would like to keep an eye on science but who don't want to spend all their reading time staying current. With articles from sources running from *Science News* to the *Atlantic Monthly* to *Mother Jones,* it spans a range that few readers are likely to cover on their own. And with its emphasis on articles of interest to the general reader, it tends to come up with essays that highlight broader issues called up by the scientific points on which each article turns. Without the editors' especially intending it for that purpose, this makes the book very interesting to people who like to look at the consequences of scientific ideas—SF fans and writers, for example.

Previous installments of this series have been somewhat tilted toward medical and biological sciences; a bit of a disappointment, considering all the brilliant theorizing and discovery taking place in physics, astronomy, and cosmology nowadays. Or perhaps previous editors have felt, as many newspaper science sections seem to imply, that the general reader is less knowledgeable and less interested in the physical sciences. This year, Sacks—or Cohen—has made a more serious effort to come up with good material on the physical science side

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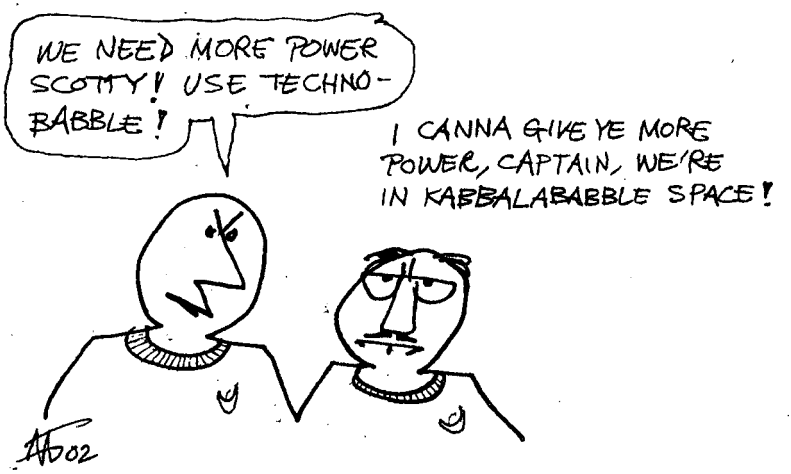
of the balance. The result is probably the best in the series so far.

There are so many good articles in the book that it's probably best just to list a few of the ones I found most interesting. On the amusing side is Liza Mundy's "A World of Their Own," about crackpot scientists who insist on bringing their versions of a unified field theory to the attention of the professionals in the local physics department. Or Frank Wilzcek's "The World's Numerical Recipe," which elegantly explores the intellectual links joining quantum chromodynamics and the ancient concept of the music of the spheres. Either could provide plenty of starting points for a novelist. So could Natalie Angier's "Scientists Reach out to Distant Worlds," which quotes Robert A. Forward on the subject of supplying an interstellar voyage, although the essay's overall approach is far from reverent.

The articles on the social and medical topics are often of equal interest. Charles C. Mann's "1491" looks at evidence that the pre-Columbian population of the Americas was far larger than many traditional accounts suggest. If so, the implications for histories of the European colonization are profound. Or listen to Atul Gawande, a surgeon, talk about how every resident learns surgery: by practicing on patients who usually have no idea that the doctor is performing the operation for the first time. One article that especially resonated with me was Floyd Skloot's account of how Alzheimer's patients remember music long after their other memories are gone, something I observed in both my mother and my late father-in-law.

If you're only going to have one science fact book around the house, you could make a pretty strong argument that this ought to be the one. ○



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SF Conventional Calendar

Start thinking about winter congoing—the perfect season for indoor weekends. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

JANUARY 2004

2–4—**EveCon.** For info, write: **1607 Thomas Rd., Friendly MD 20744.** Or phone: **(301) 292-5231** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) www.fantek.org. (E-mail) cherylz@fantek.org.** Con will be held in: Reston VA (near Washington DC) (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton. Guests will include: none announced. "Spaceships & Robots & Clones".

2–4—**ShadowCon. www.shadowcon.org. kanellissa@aol.com.** Days Hotel, Memphis TN. Low-key relaxacon.

7–25—**Middle Earth Tour. (650) 595-2090. www.pacificpathways.com.** New Zealand. Lord of the Rings film sites.

9–11—**GAFilk. www.gafilk.org.** Holiday Inn Airport North, Atlanta GA. M. Samson, M. Crowell. SF folksinging.

9–11—**Creation. (818) 409-0960. www.creationent.com.** Hilton Metropole, London UK Nimoy. Commercial Trek event.

15–Feb. 14—**Clarion South, Box 1394, Toowong QLD 4066, Australia. (61 7 0407) 695-950.** Brisbane. Workshop.

16–18—**Arisia, Bldg. 600, #322, 1 Kendall Sq., Cambridge MA 02139. www.arisia.org.** Boston Park Plaza. Powers.

16–18—**ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. (423) 842-7130. www.chattacon.org.** M. Tiedemann, J. Keyes.

16–18—**RustyCon, Box 84291, Seattle WA 98124. www.rustycon.com. info@rustycon.com.** Doubletree, Bellevue WA.

22–26—**FURther ConFusion, 105 Sierra Way #236, Milpitas CA 95035.** San Jose CA. Furries/anthropomorphics.

23–25—**ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. www.stilyagi.org.** Marriott, Troy MI. Bruce Sterling.

23–25—**MarsCon. www.marscon.net. registration@marscon.net** Clarion, Williamsburg VA. Relaxacon & art show.

23–25—**OhayoCon. (614) 463-1234. www.ohayocon.com. info@ohayocon.com.** Hyatt, Columbus OH. Anime.

29–Feb. 1—**CapriCon, Box 60085, Chicago IL 60660. www.capricon.org.** Sheraton, Arlington Hts. IL. SF/fantasy.

30–Feb. 1—**VeriCon, HRSFA, 4 Univ. Hall, Cambridge MA 02138. www.vericon.org.** Harvard. P. Wrede, C. Vess.

30–Feb. 1—**UshiCon, Box 40937, Austin TX 78704. www.ushicon.com. info@ushicon.com.** Marriott. Anime.

31–Feb. 1—**Creation, 1010 N. Central Ave., 4th floor, Glendale CA 91202. (818) 409-0960.** Hilton, Burbank CA.

FEBRUARY 2004

6–9—**UK Filk Con, c/o Weingart, 17 Chapin Rd., Farmingdale NY 11735. awalker@weyrd.org.** UK. SF folksinging.

7–8—**Creation, 1010 N. Central Ave., 4th floor, Glendale CA 91202. (818) 409-0960.** Doubletree, Bellevue WA. Media.

13–15—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. www.nesfa.org.** Sheraton, Boston MA. Baxter, Mitchell, Hescock.

13–15—**Farpoint, Box 164, Woodbine MD 21797. www.farpointcon.com.** Marriott, Hunt Valley MD. Star Trek.

13–15—**Gallifrey, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91609. www.gallifreyone.com.** Airtel, Los Angeles CA. Mumy. Dr. Who.

SEPTEMBER 2004

2–6—**Noreascon 4, Box 1010, Framingham MA 01701. www.noreascon.org.** Boston MA. William Tenn. WorldCon. $160+.

AUGUST 2005

4–8—**Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** Glasgow Scotland. $135/£85+.

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1–5—**CascadiaCon, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. www.seattle2005.org.** The NASFiC, while Worldcon's in Glasgow. $75.

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23–27—**LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com.** Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. The WorldCon. $125+

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MARCH COVER STORY

Popular and prolific author **Robert Reed**, one of our most frequent contributors, returns next issue with our lead story for March, taking us to a strangely sideways world where nothing is quite as it seems for the compelling and powerful saga of a *very* long-lived family that must somehow deal with "A Plague of Life."

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy Award-winner **Gene Wolfe** grants us a surprising look at what goes on under a "Pulp Cover"; **Ian McDowell** returns after too long an absence to take us on a scary, fast-moving, and sometimes slyly funny adventure to the pirate-haunted Caribbean of the old Spanish Main days, including a meeting with some pirates who are quite *literally* haunting it, those who sail "Under the Flag of Night"; Hugo-winner **Allen M. Steele** takes us back to the civil war-torn frontier planet Coyote for a rough and perilous trip on "Thompson's Ferry"; British writer **Chris Beckett** makes a fascinating *Asimov's* debut with the evocative story of "Tammy Pendant"; new writer **Richard Flood** urges us to throw ourselves under the crushing wheels of "Jagganath"; **Philip C. Jennings** paints an incisive portrait of the life and career of "The Saint" (one who turns out to be nothing at all like what you'd *think* a holy man to be!); and new writer **Sarah A. Hoyt** makes a bittersweet *Asimov's* debut with the haunting story of a boy caught quite literally between two different worlds, in "What She Left Behind."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column sorts through some further moments in "Fragments Out of Time: Two"; and former *Playboy* fiction editor **Alice K. Turner** provides us with a Guest Editorial that investigates the fantastic, beautiful, and sometimes horrific worlds to be found in "The Feature Films of Hayao Miyazaki"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our March issue on sale at your newsstand on February 3, 2004.

COMING SOON

great new stories by **William Barton**, **James Patrick Kelly**, **Allen M. Steele**, **Mary Rosenblum**, **Kage Baker**, **Larry Niven**, **Charles Stross**, **William Sanders**, **Gregory Feeley**, **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, and many more.

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